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POINTS ABOUT THE PRISONER

#77

DAVID ANTHONY KRAFT'S

COMICS INTERVIEW

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UP FRONT

Have you ever wondered exactly what money was? Silly question, right? Everyone knows what money is — it's that green paper stuff you carry in your wallet. Or it's the stuff you put in the bank to write checks against. It's also that stuff you don't have to shell out immediately when you buy something with a credit card. But does that describe what money actually is? What it actually represents? No.

So what is money? If physical descriptions don't work and lists of its uses don't cover it, what have you got left? I think you're left with what money represents. And by that I don't mean gold, either. Even back when the country was on the gold standard and a dollar was worth a certain small — very small — amount of gold, money didn't really represent gold. No, money represents work.

Consider this: I am, of course, a comic-book writer. That is the kind of work I do. Now, I can't do any of my type of work for the local grocery store in exchange for food, can I? I mean, who ever heard of a grocery store needing to have comic books written for it? Nor will my auto mechanic accept comic-book writing in exchange for fixing my car (much though I wish this weren't true . . .). As a matter of fact, only comic book readers will accept my type of work in exchange for some of their own work. Once again, though, we have a probable impass. It's doubtful that I need exactly the kind of work all of you would have to offer each month. So, instead, you pay for my work with money — which represents the work you do — and I, using the units of work I received from you readers, exchange my work — in the form of the money made from selling the comic books — with the grocery store and the auto mechanic for some of their work.

Now, all of this seems pretty basic so far, right? Well, here's a question for you . . . What would you do if there was no money? What would you do if the government came to you and ordered you to spend, say, 25% of your working time working directly for the government without pay? I, for instance, would be forced to "freely" contribute 25% of my writing time writing comic books for the government. Auto mechanics would have to spend 25% of their time fixing government cars. Ditch diggers would have to spend 25% of their time digging government ditches. I'm sure you get the idea . . . Would you stand for this? Would *anybody* stand for this?

I seriously doubt it.

Yet we all watch as the government forces us to "freely" contribute 25% (or more) of our *money* — which is just a handy representation of our work — and then allow them to spend as they desire. My question is this: Why?

Think about it . . .

—Henry Vogel

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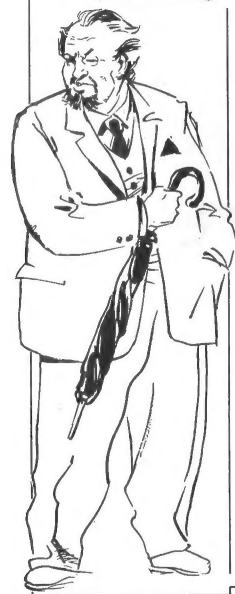
"It (THE PRISONER series) came about from

DEAN MOTTER & MARK ASKWITH



MARTY HERZOG: *How did THE PRISONER come about? What was the initial germ of an idea, and who put it together, and how did it come together?*

DEAN MOTTER: It all came about from a trip I made to New York over a year ago. I went down to conduct some business, and I had lunch with **Richard Bruning,** DC's art director and later the editor of the series. We were just discussing design questions, format questions . . . and somehow it came up when discussing MISTER X that I might be a good candidate for the proposal DC had on their boards to produce a **PRISONER** series. Richard and I talked about it briefly, and I wasn't that keen on it at first. It seemed like it was a closed book, pretty well complete by itself.

MARTY: *At that time were they talking about an adaptation of the TV series, or a continuation?*

DEAN: I don't think they had an idea of what exactly they wanted to do. It was a licensed property that was available for them to pick up. At the last editorial retreat they had discussed different kinds of properties that could be appropriate for their line. The outcome was that when they approached me — it wasn't even a genuine *approach*, it was just off the top of Richard's head because he saw some similarities between Number Six and Mister X.

I went back to my hotel room that night and thought about it a little bit more.

MARTY: *And, quite honestly, until that day you had never thought or given any consideration to THE PRISONER?*

DEAN: Not as a comic book, no.

MARTY: *Were you — and be very, very honest — were you a fan?*

DEAN: Yeah, I was. I watched the TV show when I was in high school, made sure I saw every episode every time they were aired. It was rerun, in my early years at college. It didn't hold much of a fascination for me. I think as the spy genre of entertainment became more and more passé, it slipped from *my* area of interest.

MARTY: *But you did have respect for the character and the storyline.*

DEAN: Oh, yes, very much so!

MARTY: *Mark, where did you come in?*

MARK ASKWITH: Well, Dean came back from New York and he had a number of *projects*. Dean mentioned,

On the two pages: character studies, along with the classic 19th century bicycle.

a trip I made to New York over a year ago."

"We talked about this, we talked about this, we talked about this." — I won't mention what the other ones were. *(Laughter.)* But Dean was particularly excited about *one* of them, and it *wasn't* THE PRISONER, and we won't say what it is.

MARTY: *Why?*

DEAN: Well . . .

MARK: When he mentioned THE PRISONER, I couldn't believe it. To me that was a dream project. Again, like Richard before me, I looked at Dean and said, "You would be *great!*" I have been following espionage and am quite plugged into that world. I've read **Graham Greene** and **John LeCarré** and I said, "Dean, don't worry about the espionage side of it. I can get you all of the books on the new hardware, I can update you on everything." So an instant deal was struck. I would research THE PRISONER and then Dean would go off and create the masterpiece.

MARTY: *Well, let's go back even further — back, back — (Laughter.) Mark, where did you come in? Dean is MISTER X, Dean is SACRED AND THE PROFANE, Dean is this and Dean is that, etc.*

MARK: I have a long and checkered past. I ran the Silver Snail, which is one of Canada's *most renowned* comic-book stores!

DEAN: Let's mention Ron's name.

MARK: Hi Ron, hi Tom! Dean and **Ken Steacy** and **Paul Rivoche** and **Rob McIntyre** had a studio over the old Silver Snail, so I knew them briefly through that. And I had worked as a designer and a pressman and various other things, so I came into the Silver Snail with a strange and different background. I have a

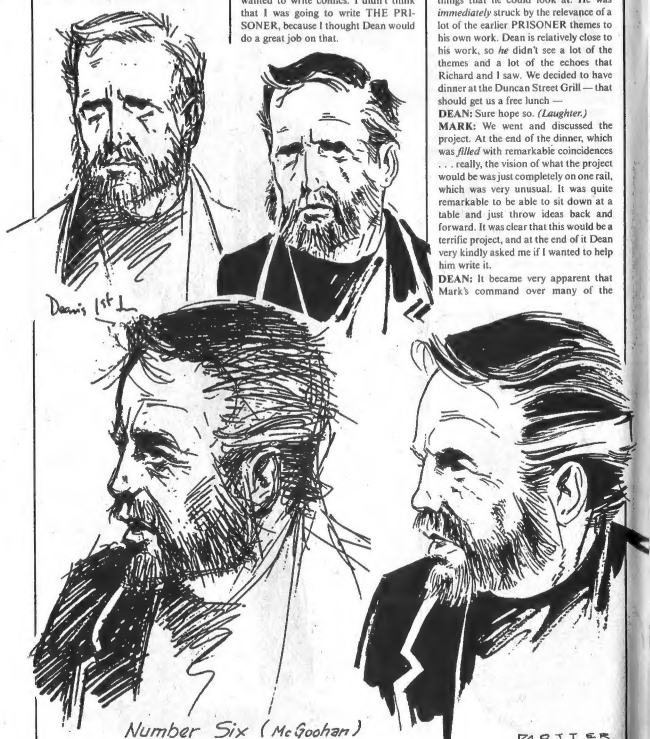
THE PRISONER ® 1989 ITC Entertainment. MR. X ® 1989 Vortex Comics, Inc. Gil Kane/Jack Kirby artwork ® 1975 Marvel Entertainment Group, Inc.

"Critics have complained that there

degree in English literature — I am very interested in semiology — I've done different things.

I left the world of fine art and literature publishing, got into the Silver Snail.

Later, I researched COMIC BOOK CONFIDENTIAL for **Ron Mann**, and told him who my favorite artists were and what their addresses and phone numbers were. *(Laughter.)* But really, I wanted to write comics. I didn't think that I was going to write THE PRISONER, because I thought Dean would do a great job on that.



I was writing a novel called THE SILENCERS, which was about a group of Canadian spies in Europe. So, Dean and I discussed a lot of THE PRISONER stuff, and I brought in several things that he could look at. He was *immediately* struck by the relevance of a lot of the earlier PRISONER themes to his own work. Dean is relatively close to his work, so *he* didn't see a lot of the themes and a lot of the echoes that Richard and I saw. We decided to have dinner at the Duncan Street Grill — that should get us a free lunch —

DEAN: Sure hope so. *(Laughter.)*

MARK: We went and discussed the project. At the end of the dinner, which was *filled* with remarkable coincidences . . . really, the vision of what the project would be was just completely on one rail, which was very unusual. It was quite remarkable to be able to sit down at a table and just throw ideas back and forward. It was clear that this would be a terrific project, and at the end of it Dean very kindly asked me if I wanted to help him write it.

DEAN: It became very apparent that Mark's command over many of the

was misogyny in THE PRISONER."

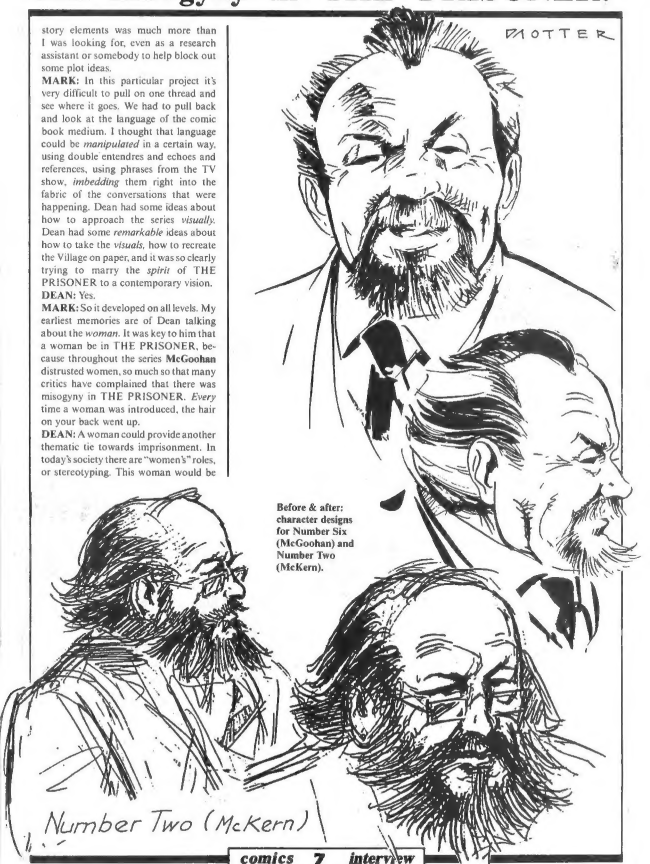
story elements was much more than I was looking for, even as a research assistant or somebody to help block out some plot ideas.

MARK: In this particular project it's very difficult to pull on one thread and see where it goes. We had to pull back and look at the language of the comic book medium. I thought that language could be *manipulated* in a certain way, using double entendres and echoes and references, using phrases from the TV show, *imbedding* them right into the fabric of the conversations that were happening. Dean had some ideas about how to approach the series *visually*. Dean had some *remarkable* ideas about how to take the *visuals*, how to recreate the Village on paper, and it was so clearly trying to marry the *spirit* of THE PRISONER to a contemporary vision.

DEAN: Yes.

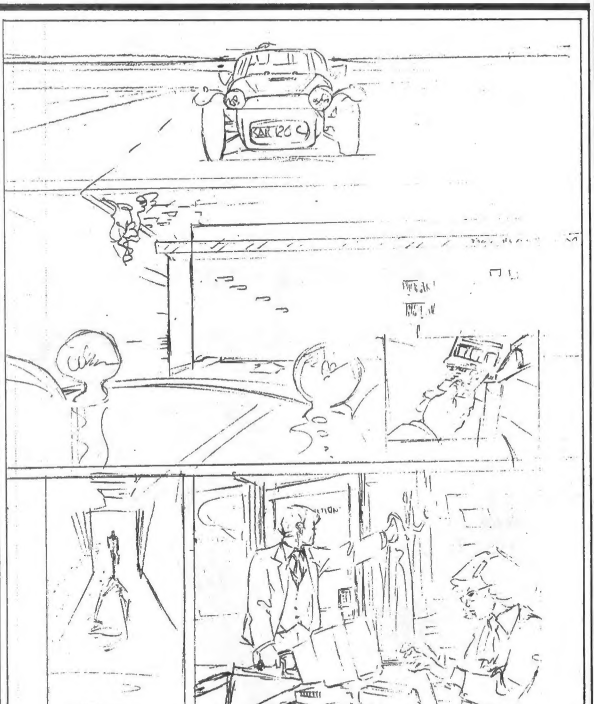
MARK: So it developed on all levels. My earliest memories are of Dean talking about the *woman*. It was key to him that a woman be in THE PRISONER, because throughout the series **McGoohan** distrusted women, so much so that many critics have complained that there was misogyny in THE PRISONER. *Every* time a woman was introduced, the hair on your back went up.

DEAN: A woman could provide another thematic tie towards imprisonment. In today's society there are "women's" roles, or stereotyping. This woman would be



Before & after: character designs for Number Six (McGoohan) and Number Two (McKern).

"There's one black agent; everybody else is from the



Above & next page: pencils and finished inks from DC's THE PRISONER #1/A.

wrestling with situations in her own life that were imprisoning her — she was seeking escape in some fashion.

MARK: And when you look at how we constructed the agency that she works for, it's *predominantly* male — predominantly white Anglo-Saxon male. There's one black agent, her, and everybody else is cut from the same socio-economic cloth. That in itself is a statement, that *obviously* she's gotten to the level that she's at through a lot of skill and determination, but that she is still *in* a system that has oppressed women.

MARTY: *How early in the development did this woman come into the plot, and where did the plot come from?*

DEAN: When I decided this series would

same cloth — a system that has oppressed women."

KAR 120C
6'6" MAX. HEADROOM
HELLO SIR. YOU'VE A STACK OF MESSAGES AND A FOUR O'CLOCK MEETING WITH COLONEL J.
GET DOWN HERE STRAIGHT AWAY!

be interesting to do *only* with the benefit of the perspective that 20 years had given us, and that we needed a new way to enter the Village, a new character, someone that we could somehow relate to. If Number Six was still there he would be a little nuts, and even at the best of times in the TV show he was such an enigmatic character that it would be hard to feel the empathy with him that I wanted the reader to feel.

MARK: And we both agreed on the approach — there could be no thought balloons, there could be no narrator — you had to view the character of Number Six, and subsequently the character of Number Two, from a third point of view. Someone had to interact with these characters, and they had to be revealed through their *actions* and through their *words*.

That has nothing to do with the plot, but that determines the plot. When Dean started blocking out certain sequences

"We intended to show how clever we were with narrative."

he'd say, "Well, we can't do that because no one will know what she's doing." How the story is going to be presented *dictates* many things. People were struck by the fact that there were so few words in THE PRISONER. That was deliberate. The Prisoner is a series of gesture and nuance.

MARTY: *Did you develop the plot for the entire series prior to writing issue #1, or did it somehow plot itself?*

DEAN: Once DC had said we should submit a proposal, we wrote out a proposal that covered all four books.

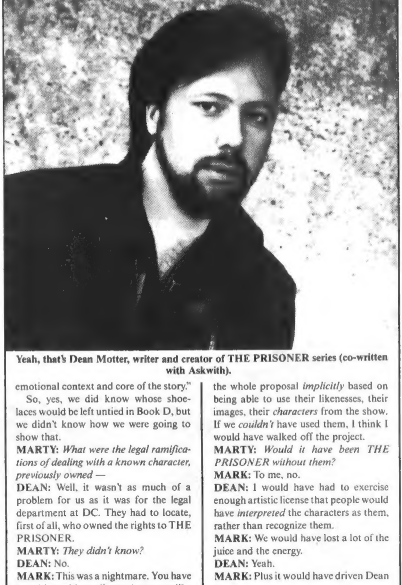
MARK: Dean and I sat down and worked out three books, that's what we thought it was going to be. Those three books are remarkably similar to the first three books of the series. When I looked at what we had for the first three books, I just thought I would tack on what *I* thought would be an interesting ending. So, I wrote up a very *bizarre* Book D with a real twist and some spin — really it was a question of writing up the story and then throwing it from the top of the CN Tower. It *really* appealed to me, and Richard and Dean agreed. But, as these things happen, when I started seeing the art for Book C, I *really* was unhappy with Book D.

MARTY: *As you had originally plotted it.*

MARK: It had nothing to do with plot, because it's still the same plot — everything that I felt would happen in Book D, happens — except that the *way* that story is told is entirely different from the way that it was originally conceived. Something happened when Dean started drawing Book D. I thought, I really like this." *(Laughter.)* "Some thing very strange is happening. This is about human beings, this is about people." So the structure of Book D had to be simpler. It had to have a beginning and a middle and an end.

DEAN: We had intended to show off with how clever we were with narrative, with special effects, with ways of manipulating images. Some of that survived, but very little.

MARK: Well, all of the plot is there, all of the ideas are there, and the computer graphics are in there. But it isn't the pyrotechnic tour de force we *had* planned. I was afraid we would lose the emotional core of the story, which came out beautifully in Book C. We said a lot of things that I thought we were going to *have* to say in Book D, in Book C, in terms of the art. It's quite odd to look at what you had planned and think, "But we've done a lot of this already, and what we *really* have to worry about now is the emotional context and core of the story."



Yeah, that's Dean Motter, writer and creator of THE PRISONER series (co-written with Askwith).

So, yes, we did know whose shoelaces would be left untied in Book D, but we didn't know how we were going to show that.

MARTY: *What were the legal ramifications of dealing with a known character, previously owned —*

DEAN: Well, it wasn't as much of a problem for us as it was for the legal department at DC. They had to locate, first of all, who owned the rights to THE PRISONER.

MARTY: *They didn't know?*

DEAN: No.

MARK: This was a nightmare. You have a problem with any licensed property like this — does the distributor own it, does **Patrick McGoohan** own it, who owns it? In this case someone came forward and said, "Oh, I own this property." As it turned out, they did *not* own the property. I really take my hat off to the people who worked on this from DC's end, because they were able to discover who had the rights. We also had to secure the rights to the likenesses of **Patrick McGoohan** and **Leo McKern,** because of course their likenesses are their property. Dean had to draw what the characters would look like, and we did the whole proposal *implicitly* based on being able to use their likenesses, their images, their *characters* from the show. If we *couldn't* have used them, I think I would have walked off the project.

MARTY: *Would it have been THE PRISONER without them?*

MARK: To me, no.

DEAN: I would have had to exercise enough artistic license that people would have *interpreted* the characters as them, rather than recognize them.

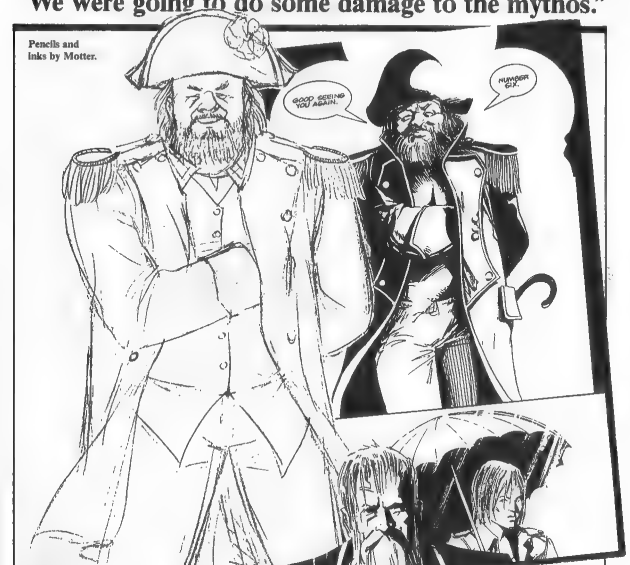
MARK: We would have lost a lot of the juice and the energy.

DEAN: Yeah.

MARK: Plus it would have driven Dean crazy.

DEAN: And I think that DC also recognized that to do this properly . . . one of the few recognizable figures — you don't have the *Enterprise* like STAR TREK — was **Patrick McGoohan.** That was the only thing that *everybody* would recognize as THE PRISONER. Maybe his blazer. *(Laughter.)* Even the Village would be hard to recognize. So, DC pursued getting the rights, locating **Patrick McGoohan's** and **Leo McKern's** agents, securing the permission from them to use their likenesses. That was based on them seeing and agreeing to the

"We were going to do some damage to the mythos."



proposal, giving their blessings, as it were, to the idea of the story. We were concerned about this because we really were going to do some "damage" to the mythos.

MARTY: *Everybody had given up hope that there ever would be a sequel.*

DEAN: There were so many *attempts* to do it, I think a lot of people didn't believe it would ever be done.

MARK: Marvel tried *twice*, once with **Jack Kirby** — and it really was a retelling of the first episode of THE PRISONER — and then **Steve Englehart** and **Gil Kane** attempted the story, with inks by **Steve Leialoha** — and, again, that was going to be a retelling of the first episode. Both books were pencilled, and some of the pages were inked on the second one, but they never came to fruition. Apparently, in both cases, it was stopped editorially, because they had not captured whatever the spirit of THE PRISONER was. I have seen the pages of both stories and they were very interesting, but editorially I think they made the correct decision. It was much more DANGER MAN than THE PRISONER.

DEAN: They made it into a Marvel MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.! There were many sequels that were proposed, and ITC Entertainment — who *do* own the

"It's one of those strange series where the

rights to THE PRISONER — shot virtually all of them down for one reason or another. ITC gave us their blessings and made this the authorized sequel. We have heard back from ITC that this is the closest anybody has come to creating a sequel that actually has anything in common with the TV series, that wasn't just a retooling or a retelling.

MARTY: *THE PRISONER was essentially Patrick McGoohan's brainchild, wasn't it?*

MARK: I would dispute that. **George Markstein,** I think, came up with a lot of the ideas, and there were a *lot* of people who had hands in the pie, who made *incredible* contributions to THE PRISONER. **Jack Shampan**, the designer, did a great job. The scripts are terrific, the music is terrific. No one can deny that **Patrick McGoohan** had an incredible impact, but to me it's one of those strange series where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

MARTY: *Has McGoohan seen your work?*

DEAN: **McGoohan** saw the proposal and character sketches, in order to give his blessing to the project, and I believe at this point the official PRISONER fan club has forwarded him copies of the book. So he *must* have seen it . . .

MARK: He may have. We haven't gone out for beers with Patrick yet. *(Laughter.)* Apparently **Leo McKern** has seen it, but I have no direct information about that. It's sad, I wish **George Markstein** had been able to see it. He continued writing for television up until he died, and he wrote a number of scripts that were quite similar to THE PRISONER — PALFREY OF WESTMINSTER.

MARTY: *There was a collaboration there, somehow some way.*

DEAN: You could say so.

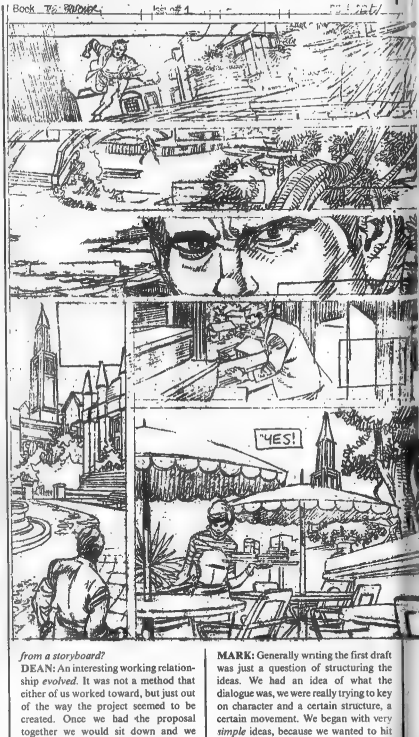
MARTY: *Just as there is between the two of you.*

MARK: Wow, that was brilliantly put! *(Laughter.)*

DEAN: We'll have the same debate as to whose idea it was. *(Laughter.)* I think the plot itself emerged from conversations Mark and I had. So far as who was responsible for what, it's difficult to say.

MARK: I've *never* been involved in a collaboration where . . . usually you start at the starting blocks, and I think we started about two miles away from the stadium. *(Laughter.)* It was like, "\\ ' 'at's the stadium going to look like? What baggage would you like to bring to this project?" And then we would talk.

MARTY: *Okay, fine, but did Dean illustrate from a script, or did Mark write from a storyboard?*

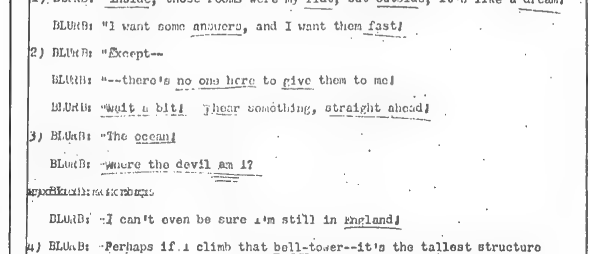


DEAN: An interesting working relationship *evolved.* It was not a method that either of us worked toward, but just out of the way the project seemed to be created. Once we had the proposal together we would sit down and we would have two or three very long meetings that would cover each book. I would bring my ideas, Mark would bring his. He would make the notes, he would go away and write the first draft of the story —

MARK: Generally writing the first draft was just a question of structuring the ideas. We had an idea of what the dialogue was, we were really trying to key on character and a certain structure, a certain movement. We began with very *simple* ideas, because we wanted to hit icons.

What surprised me was that when Dean read the first proposal . . . it was very strange. I was very interested in the first half of the book, which had the espionage and certain things happening,

whole is greater than the sum of its parts."


PRISONER--7

1) BLURB: "Inside, those rooms were my flat, but outside, it's like a dream!

BLURB: "I want some answers, and I want them fast!

2) BLURB: "Except--

BLURB: "--there's no one here to give them to me!

BLURB: "Wait a bit! There something, straight ahead!

3) BLURB: "The ocean!

BLURB: "Where the devil am I?

BLURB: "I can't even be sure I'm still in England!

4) BLURB: "Perhaps if I climb that bell-tower--it's the tallest structure around--!

5) BLURB: "No! Still nothing!

BLURB: "At last! It's the side I came from! What about the other side, looking inward---

6) BLURB: "Yes!

Left: An unpublished page from Marvel's PRISONER by Gil Kane. Above: Steve Englehart's script page for same.

and Dean was very interested in the *second* half. He kept telling me all about the second half! *(Laughter.)* I wrote the first 24 pages, stopped on the last panel of page 24, and then handed the notebook over to Dean. Then Dean sat down and wrote in the same notebook all the way through to the end. I looked at it and I couldn't believe it, it was like I had been writing in my sleep.

DEAN: I was awake when I was writing this. *(Laughter.)*

MARK: But with MISTER X we never know. *(Laughter.)* We always seemed to argue about the last three or four pages of every book. We had some refining to do, but we came up with something that we were both happy with. On Book B — this is *months* after the proposal has been handed in — I looked at it again to write the script, and I thought, "Okay, I'll write the first half, this is what we've been doing." Something happened — to this day I don't know what — and the whole thing came out. We had roughly about 52 pages for a 48-page book. Dean got it and said, "We can take that out, we can take this out." It was almost a fluke . . .

DEAN: That it emerged the way it did, yes.

MARTY: *Did your original proposal have a beginning and an end that you followed?*

DEAN: To a degree. There were differences, but they were not significant.

MARK: One of the things that Dean and I were really keen on doing was telling a story that had verbal and visual echoes, not only within the comic book but also of the TV show. So, to do something like that is like listening to a piece of music and then bringing up certain riffs and certain echoes, using panel shapes, panel sizes, certain visual ideas. When Dean was drawing the first book, I would come down every two or three days to see what he was doing, because I didn't want to write the second book until I had seen the first book, to *see* which panels to use as echoes.

MARTY: *Mark, as the researcher, which was your original place in this book's life, you investigated the TV show probably to a greater degree than Dean.*

MARK: At that point I didn't want Dean to see the TV show.

MARTY: *You* didn't *want Dean to see the show?*

MARK: *Both* of us remembered it fairly clearly. We made a very clear decision not to watch the TV show while we were working on the proposal.

MARTY: *You did?*

MARK: What I really wanted to do was to objectively compile a wish list, from memory. We wanted Rover. We wanted the Village. We wanted **Patrick McGoohan.** "Who was your favorite Number Two?" **Leo McKern.** I didn't want to be swayed by going and watching an episode and coming back to Dean and saying, "I've just seen the first six shows, boy, we've got to use x, y, z." I wanted to stay away from that *until* we had the core idea. I didn't want it to be diluted by the TV show. When we had the shell of the story, *then* I watched the show. I came back to Dean and said, "My God, we've

"If you look at what Number Two is saying, he never

opened up a *huge* can of worms." Paranoia, information, communication and identity . . . the TV show just exploded when I watched it again, it was *much* better than I remembered.

MARTY: *Now, in watching the TV show — there are some people who say that THE PRISONER was full of questions and never ever had any answers, and then I've heard other people say that the entire thing is answers, not questions. Did you try to answer or question, or conclude the TV show?*

DEAN: The one thing that we knew was that THE PRISONER was a show that was based on questions, based on enigmas, and if we were to *answer* any of those then we'd be strung up without *mercy* by the fans of the show. The questions had to be treated with some reverence. Coming back to those questions and those structures, we might be able to give some new insight into them, but certainly not any answers.

MARK: But we wanted to bring those questions up again, we wanted to resurrect them. In the second book I wanted the character of the woman to meet Number Six and ask the questions that *anybody* would ask! *(Laughter.)* "Where am I? What's this place?"

DEAN: Right.

MARK: And, of course, that echoes back to the show. With someone like Number Six, you're not going to get any simple answers. Then she meets somebody new and thinks, "Boy, I'm going to get some answers now." If you listen to what Number Two is saying, he never really tells a lie, but he doesn't tell all of the truth. What I hadn't counted on, was that when I wrote the last eight pages of Book B it was one of the most exciting things I've ever written, because it was really a **Leo McKern** monologue. When Dean started adding the pictures to the words that I had written, a *complete* resonance happened. The visuals were corroborating what Number Two was saying, but he in fact was only giving our protagonist a *hint* of what actually was going on

DEAN: He was manipulating the information.

MARK: Dean and I are both interested in the media and communication. We're *very* interested in how things can be distorted and yet still be truthful.

DEAN: True. *(Laughter.)* It's interesting, Book D has a lot to do with the last episode of the TV show. As to *what* it has to do with the last episode, it's still a set of questions. We don't make a direct connection, we have a number of little inquiries.

MARK: Again, we had a few arguments on this. I wanted to make some much more concrete links to the TV series but Richard and Dean felt that a few things had to be taken out.

DEAN: In the end, we let the readers ask the questions and come up with their own answers. The whole series is laced with levels of storytelling. We're asking people to read between the lines, to pay attention to some of the subtleties and go back and see what they mean.

MARK: One of the things that delights me is that when people read the first book, they watch *for* certain things. After reading Book D, Book A reads in an entirely different way. They notice characters they never noticed before. They notice rhythms, panels that were echoed in Book D. Suddenly the *whole* book is going to gel — hopefully in crystal, although it may turn out to be sludge. *(Laughter.)* Let's hope it crystallizes for everybody

MARTY: *Was the whole thing a dream or was it real?*

DEAN and MARK: *(A moment while they choke back laughter and then compose themselves.)*

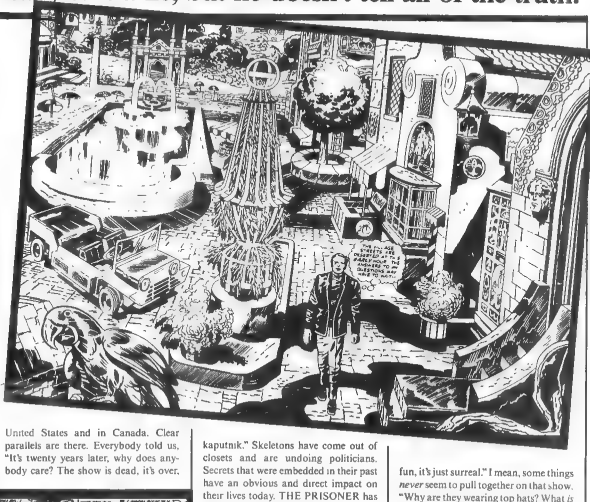
DEAN: This is not a hoax, this is not a dream — Superman gets married! *(Laughter.)*

MARK: At the end of Book D, if someone is attuned to what is going on in the news today, hopefully the story will resonate and people will pick up on things that are going on in Britain, the

Yet, another unpublished Prisoner series, again, from Marvel (by Jack Kirby & Mike Royer).

THE PRISONER, HAD BEEN IN HIS LONDON FLAT WHEN IT WAS INVADED BY THE SINISTER WHITE GLOBE OF THE VILLAGE, WHEN THE GLOBE HAD BOWLED BACKWARD INTO HIS SUBCONSCIOUS FOLDING TO ITS NATURE...
THE EFFECT WAS BUBBLE AT FIRST...THEN IT DEVELOPED WITH ALARMING RAPIDITY. THE PRISONER HAD CLUTCHED HIS THROAT AND FOUGHT FOR BREATH. THE TRUTH WAS UPON HIM--DRAGGING HIM OF RESISTANCE...
FEAR, PANIC, AND HELPLESSNESS WERE THE PRISONER'S FINAL REACTIONS BEFORE HE SURRENDERED TO THE DARKNESS THAT RUSHED IN TO SEIZE HIM...
HE NEVER FELT HIMSELF FALLING--THE PRISONER WAS UNCONSCIOUS WHEN HIS BODY STRUCK THE FLOOR...WHOEVER HAD PUT THE GAS INTO HIS ROOM HAD DONE THEIR JOB WELL...
ON THE TELEVISION SCREEN: THE STORY OF OUR MAN'S BATTLE AGAINST UNSEEN POWERS, AND HIS ESCAPE FROM THE VILLAGE, WAS BEING RELAYED TO THE WORLD AT THE HEAD OF ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY. AS HE SAT IN CONTROLLED AWE BEHIND HIS DESK, HE KNEW THAT THIS BOOK BECAME IMPORTANT TO ALL OF US!! THIS MAN'S IMPORTANT TO ALL OF US--HE'S DIRECTLY CALLED--
THE PRISONER
LET'S KEEP HIM IN HOTEL SUITE UNTIL WE PROVE OR DISPROVE HIS CONTENTIONS WITH ACTUAL BOOKWORK
I'VE NEVER BEEN SO SCARED BEFORE I DON'T KNOW WHERE IT'S LOCATED--OR HOW I GOT HERE!

really tells a lie, but he doesn't tell all of the truth."



United States and in Canada. Clear parallels are there. Everybody told us, "It's twenty years later, why does anybody care? The show is dead, it's over.

kaputnik." Skeletons have come out of closets and are undoing politicians. Secrets that were embedded in their past have an obvious and direct impact on their lives today. THE PRISONER has themes that are still resonant today.

MARTY: *Why is there a Village?*

DEAN: Why *was* there a Village? *(Laughter.)* What *we're* dealing with is a ghost town, a ruin of some kind of prototype, some kind of installation. There are archetypes for the actual Village. There was a camp in Scotland during the second World War where many British agents whose information was too sensitive were sent for their own safety. There was Camp X in Canada where spies were trained. There are a number of hidden communities throughout the world, so it's not stretching it that far to say that there was a Village.

As to why it appeared like this little fairy tale sort of Land of Oz wonderland in a picturesque landscape is simply curiosity.

MARK: Before I talked to Dean about what we were going to do I wrote down phrases and words. I remembered that the show was "surreal". I discovered that the core of surrealism is "what do images and words mean?" Identity. When I watched the TV show I thought, "This is fun, it's just surreal." I mean, some things *never* seem to pull together on that show. "Why are they wearing top hats? What *is* that big, white ball?" But when you pull away from it, it has this very strange internal logic. It all seemed to make sense. The style has bearing on the content.

DEAN: Yes.

MARK: What we tried to do was find that internal logic and figure out a system for the Village.

DEAN: And figure out how it had deteriorated over the years. But just to elaborate a little bit more on the question of the Village, our own theory became that somehow this installation was run by a *number* of governments, and that it was for people who had retired or had outlived their usefulness but had to be taken care of somehow, or who had become a danger or an embarrassment to their own governments.

MARK: What I thought was very *sinister* — and I posited this to Dean — was that twenty years ago we were in a period where everybody distrusted spies. There was a real sense that governments didn't *like* spies. What if there was a KGB *within* the KGB, a CIA *within* the

"We quibbled . . . My ending was different from Dean's."

CIA, something like this in *every* spy agency, and all of those little cabals got together and had common interests? Plumbers have something in common with other plumbers, espionage agents have something in common with other espionage agents. It doesn't matter if a spy is Russian, West German, East German or American, his trade craft gives him a bond with the other spies. So, what *if* on a very strange hypothetical level you could *unite* all of these people, and they *had* been united in 1968, and one of the products was this prototype Village? That's scary.

DEAN: And of course it didn't quite work and somehow had been abandoned or exposed. That becomes the weak link in its own internal logic, which makes it that much more interesting. And that in turn becomes the basis for our what happened then to Number Two. He, like any good Watergate criminal, took the fall, was sent off to a nice prison somewhere where he could wrte his book —

MARK: Play tennis. *(Laughter.)*

DEAN: Enjoy a leisurely retirement, as it were, in his *own* Village. His reward, of course, was either monetary or other, for taking the fall.

MARK: We knew in our minds what that would be, but we didn't want to explicitly state that in the books. There were a number of discussions between Thomas and his immediate superior, Ross, *about* Number Two, and it's clear that Number Two did have a *clear* contract with the government. A deal was struck, and in that deal Number Two was going to get a number of perks and favors.

MARTY: *Who is Number One?*

DEAN: That's at the end of Book D. We assume there is a Number One

MARK: Don't give it away!

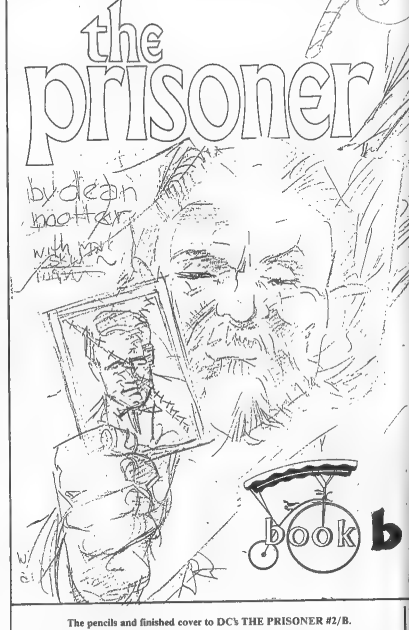
DEAN: I'm not giving it away! This will appear *after* the book has gone out.

MARK: I would like to say, as I said *before*, Dean and I always seem to quibble about the last three or four pages! We quibbled about this. *My* ending was different from Dean's!

DEAN: Quibble is a very quaint word, a dainty word.

MARK: Well, it *was* dainty, we didn't slug it out! *(Laughter.)* I said what I thought the ending should be, and I'll tell you! I thought that Alice — I can say that now, reveal that the woman's real name is Alice, we kind of purposely let it slip at the end of Book D

MARTY: *What is the importance of Alice?*

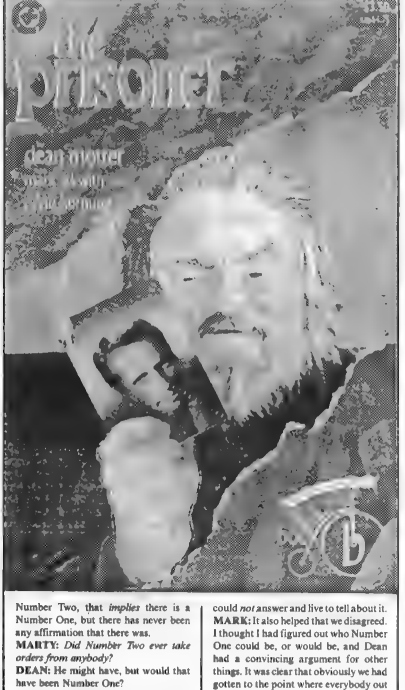


The pencils and finished cover to DC's THE PRISONER #2/B.

MARK: ALICE IN WONDERLAND. *(Laughter.)* That was something that *I* brought to the table, because I remembered a portfolio Dean drew ALICE IN WONDERLAND. I wanted Alice to ask Number Six "Who was Number One?" and I wanted Number Six to reply, "Who *is*, Number Six?" Now, I thought it was fun because the "who is?" "who was?" is an echo back to "Who am I?" "You are Number Six." "Who's Number One?" "You are Number Six." So, there were echoes, there were references. However, both Richard and Dean thought that that was pretty weak. They ganged up on me. I gave it a gallant fight, but I'm not **Mike Tyson.** The whole phrase got lifted and replaced by Dean's phrase.

DEAN: Which had to do with . . . are we to assume that there *is* a Number One simply because there is a Number Two? Again, it's a logic puzzle. There *is* a

"I had figured out who Number One could be, or would be."



Number Two, that *implies* there is a Number One, but there has never been any affirmation that there was.

MARTY: *Did Number Two ever take orders from anybody?*

DEAN: He might have, but would that have been Number One?

MARK: From *my* point of view, he definitely did. When the Village was set up there *was* a Number One. As to the identity of Number One, that was something that Dean and I feuded about. The one thing we *agreed* on was that we weren't going to tell anybody! *(Laughter.)*

DEAN: It was one of those questions we could *not* answer and live to tell about it.

MARK: It also helped that we disagreed. I thought I had figured out who Number One could be, or would be, and Dean had a convincing argument for other things. It was clear that obviously we had gotten to the point where everybody out there has their own personal vision, let's try to include them but narrow the focus. So, the focus is narrowed to the point where it includes both Dean's interpretation *and* mine —

DEAN: But you're still left with the question. Number Six does not say there wasn't a Number One, nor that there was a Number One.

MARTY: *Are you saying, then, that you do not say who Number One is, and that the two of you don't know who Number One is, or are you not willing to admit that you believe you know who Number One is?*

DEAN: We both have different interpretations.

MARK: Yes

MARTY: *Come on, say it then! Your interpretation is that Number One is?*

DEAN: My interpretation was that there was no Number One, that the chairman of the Village was Number Two and he was taking orders from the President or the Queen or the Commissar or, you know, a committee of all of them. By calling him Number Two they were simply defining his role. That's my own interpretation, not necessarily the right one.

MARTY: *Mark?*

MARK: Well, I felt that there was clearly a superior to Number Two, but it could have been a collective. It *could* have been a single person, but I *liked* that ambiguity. There were a number of people who could have fit the role of Number One, and there also was a case where that could have been more than one person.

MARTY: *It doesn't sound to me like you two were disagreeing.*

MARK: Well, it doesn't *sound* like it, but fundamentally it's shades of difference. I respect Dean's opinion, and I think he respects mine.

MARTY: *So, because of this respect you chose to ignore it?*

MARK: No, we tackled it.

MARTY: *You chose not to answer it.*

MARK: No, we do, but we answer it in such a way that both his vision and my vision, which were close anyway, are contained.

DEAN: It's like, "Who was Number Six?" It's the same kind of question. It's one of those questions that for people who revere the series and study the series, if we were to answer it, we would be destroying the series.

MARK: In many ways working out the answers is what THE PRISONER is all about.

DEAN: It's about the process.

MARK: It's about *your* participation in the process. That is *paramount* in THE PRISONER! To use a literary aside, the poetry of **John Ashbury,** one of my favorite American poets, often is about doing the work when you read it to connect things up. If someone picks up our version of THE PRISONER, if they do a little bit of research — on ALICE IN WONDERLAND, on the Iran-Contra

"Number One was John F. Kennedy. *(Laughter.)*"

Affair, or any number of things that are just alluded to — they are going to find certain resonances. It's quite funny, **Rob Walton** and I were watching a spy series last week and a lot of stuff that was in Book C came up. The show dealt with spy satellites and how Britain handles state secrets, which is very different from how Americans handle state secrets. And information *is* power, so if you analyze any country's system of revealing and protecting information, you're also analyzing how they protect power.

MARTY: *Speaking of power, did you ever feel the weight of your responsibility to this phenomenal following THE PRISONER has? You've got all of these thousands and thousands of people who have watched and analyzed THE PRISONER over and over again, and here are the two of you, mere mortals —*

DEAN: Daring to question them. *(Laughter.)*

MARTY: *Yes! Trying to answer, or even daring to go further, on something that is sacred ground!*

DEAN: I think this is what I was saying before, we *knew* that if we answered certain questions, we'd be destroying what makes THE PRISONER THE PRISONER.

MARK: Yes, but if we didn't *do* anything with it, then the book would have no teeth. We would be wimps. We *had* to know what we were doing.

MARTY: *You are wimps, you did not answer who is Number One! (Laughter.)*

DEAN: No, we would have been wimps had we answered that one.

MARK: Yes. If we had wimped out and gone for an easy answer —

DEAN: Number One was **John F. Kennedy.** *(Laughter.)* People would have said —

MARTY: *Is that true?*

DEAN: No, I'm just saying that —

MARTY: *Come on, is that true?*

DEAN: If we had said that, if we had come up with the answer, people would have said, "You're crazy, Number One is —"

MARK: When you go on to sacred ground, you have to *know* the incantations, you have to *know* what you're conjuring up, and you have to be very circumspect. Unlike the sorcerer's apprentice, you *have* to know how to get things back in the bottle when you're done. That's the trick to this kind of conjuring. We knew from the very beginning that if we were going to open this up, we *had* to know how to close it.

DEAN: Exactly.

MARK: We had to be able to close it in a skillful manner or we'd be hung as infidels or wimps — and we're neither.

MARTY: *There are a lot of followers of THE PRISONER that, I'm sure, have found a few things to dislike — maybe they like what you have done, maybe they dislike — but what have you heard from these hard-core fanatics?*

DEAN: The biggest complaint has been that it's unnecessary, which was my very fear in the beginning.

MARK: "It's a closed book, why did you open it up?"

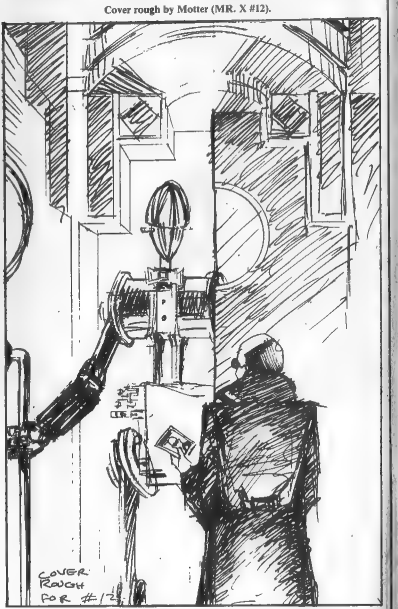
DEAN: Yeah

MARK: But it was never a closed book.

DEAN: So far no one has complained about our treatment of the myth. We've come back twenty years later, so we haven't touched the part that is already enshrined in the TV series. We have staged it with the passage of time, and no one's criticized that. We have been criticized for our profanity in the book.

MARK: The original draft did not have the profanity in it. Our editor wanted a word change, the first time he said, "I think it fits the character, and I just think it's needed. These are the 1980s." I thought, "**McGoohan** would never do that." And then I thought, "Man, if I'm thinking *that* way, I'd better quit now!" *(Laughter.)* And I suddenly realized this

Cover rough by Motter (MR. X #12).



"Moose from Archie Comics came out!" *(Laughter.)*

was one way of staking our independence. **McGoohan** would never have had Alice in this role. Profanity is *much* more a part of our language now than it was twenty years ago. We had to make it feel contemporary. Also, the character who says *all* of the profanity is our American, Lee West. That's the way his character talks

DEAN: He's a cowboy, he's an All-American football player.

MARK: He'd just as soon shovel shit in Hanoi than talk to these guys in London, and that's the way he talks and it was very true to his character. What was nice was when that one word was changed, I suddenly saw this character for what he was.

Lee West's character was designed originally as an American agent who was maybe a 40 or 50-year-old cowboy, the old CIA type. I based him on Joe Don Baker. When Dean started drawing him, Moose from Archie Comics came out! *(Laughter.)* I went, "That's not him at all!" But I *looked* at him and I knew right away, instinctively, that Dean had seen who Thomas would open up to. My character, as much as I like him and I'll use him some other time, was not the character that Thomas would open up to. *Suddenly,* Lee's character was written because of two illustrations Dean did. One was of Lee eating a hamburger. Dean said, "He's one of those guys who picks up the fry and sticks it in the ketchup and waves it around to illustrate a point." I thought, "I *know* this guy, I have worked with people like this." *(Laughter.)* So immediately we had a living human being.

DEAN: Who started to write his own lines.

MARK: Oh, he got more and more outrageous, and he *was* writing his own lines. In fact, he got to the point where he was so theatrical and so outrageous that people started saying he was a caricature, but we have a spin on that. In Book D the secret of Lee's outward demonstrations of American-ness are revealed, and it fits his character totally. Of *course* he is overacting.

DEAN: What a ham. *(Laughter.)*

MARTY: *We should point out, though, that Dean is not ashamed of it, he is an American, he just lives in Toronto.*

DEAN: I think when we're using the word "American," we're using the UGLY AMERICAN archetype.

MARTY: *Right. Dean, how do you feel about DC and the way they're handled their production of the book? They've gone through a lot of work to secure the character, the title, the likenesses and so forth. Do you like the way they've reproduced your artwork?*

Mark Askwith's cover suggestion for the "D" issue.

DEAN: I'm thrilled with the way the book has come out. The book was a big experiment in many technical ways. The biggest one, perhaps, is printing with matte inks on matte paper. The normal prestige format tends to be glossy or semiglossy. It's very difficult to print because the plates have to carry so much more ink and the paper gets saturated very easily; it's just more trouble to print. Richard and I had discussed it early on. This would be the way my artwork would be best treated. Flat medium with flat colors — they've done it. So far I've gotten my way virtually all of the way through the book, and I'm very pleased.

MARTY: *Are there any plans to re-package it?*

DEAN: The series will be collected and printed for mass market and trade release in 1990.

MARTY: *What are you going to do tomorrow?*

MARK: I'm still working on the original spy series that I was working on before all of this happened. *(Laughter.)* What I really want to do is go back and do hard espionage. I want to do *spies,* and I want to do it in the real world.

MARTY: *Is this an illustrated adventure?*

MARK: This is going to be illustrated, with the remarkable **Rick Taylor** who drew WORDSMITH. It's going to be quite realistic and cinematic because that's his style. I think it's really going to be very interesting. I really want to try other genres. I want to do some horror

"Outside comics, Dean and I will pursue other things."

stories I've written a couple of horror stories for TABOO, with **Rick Taylor.** And I would actually like to do a superhero. *(Laughter.)* If you had told me that four years ago, I would have laughed at you.

MARTY: *Well, you did do the JLA.*

MARK: Well, yes. A few years ago I thought comics could be used as an *adult* medium, doing adult stories that did not depend upon leotards and a cape. After seeing DARK KNIGHT and WATCHMEN, my interest in capes and leotards has been revived. There *is* something going on there, there *are* themes I want to look at.

DEAN: Does your wife know that? *(Laughter.)*

MARK: But there are so many genres that are not being tackled in comics. I'd really like to do some slice of life stuff.

MARTY: *Dean, what about you?*

DEAN: Well, that's still up in the air. There's a possibility of this project going to another generation. I am doing a story for Piranha Press, their FAST FORWARD book. And I've got some other proposals kicking around in my head, as far as comic books go, but nothing's gelling just yet.

MARTY: *You're doing a lot of other things for Piranha, aren't you?*

DEAN: My studio is designing the entire look for the line, as far as the packaging and promotion.

MARK: Outside of comics, both Dean and I will pursue other things.

DEAN: I still have a number of record jackets in the works. Different kinds of projects. Other than that, I'd like to see what emerges from THE PRISONER. I'm very curious to see what kind of reaction THE PRISONER generates in the field. We've had so little mail because it's not the kind of book one would normally write to unless one was very ople who
don't normally read comics.

DEAN: Yeah, and I think it will find that audience once it hits the major bookstores.

MARK: In the last issue of THE PRISONER there is a reference to an organization called Six of One, who provided us with a great deal of visual information and moral support. If *they* spread the word in PRISONER circles, then I think that could provide us with a new and viable audience.

MARTY: *Are you happy that that's the end, or do you feel that you could have or should have gone further?*

DEAN: I think, if we were to look at it critically, I'm sure we could find other directions to take it. Part of this notion of doing yet another PRISONER sequel stems from that. We have now set up yet another set of resonances, another set of questions, and I think we can travel into that territory.

MARK: It's clear, from Dean's answer, that once again we disagree. *(Laughter.)* I'm really happy with what we did.

DEAN: Oh, so am I!

MARK: I think we gave it a really good shot. I really think the way it's turned out has been remarkable on a number of different levels. I think everybody who worked on the project brought a lot of skill and insight into it, and for my money we nailed it. That makes it tough for me to be enticed back to a sequel. We've done it! I'm scared to death about going back! *(Laughter.)*

DEAN: I have to admit, I have reservations as well. I like the way it ends.

MARK: Elvis has left the building, thank you and good night. *(Laughter.)*

Patrick McGoohan — from both series (together) from Dean & Co.

"Reading Chester Gould's DICK TRACY did it for me."

Photo: Susan Dunn

All art accompanying this interview is ©1988 Walt Disney Productions/Gladstone Publishers, unless otherwise noted.

As noted in the interview with Byron Erickson (in COMICS INTERVIEW #75), the Walt Disney Company plans to publish its own comic book line sometime in 1990. The Disney characters currently appear in comics published by Gladstone. And that brings us to the subject of this interview. A major talent at Gladstone, artist/writer William Van Horn is also expected to play a significant role in the new Disney comics as well.

If you only read comics about anxiety-ridden mutants with spandex fetishes then you've probably never heard of Bill Van Horn. After all, his stories feature more punchlines than punch outs. His characters don't leap over tall buildings. They jump to absurd conclusions, trip over their insecurities and take pratfalls that would crush the ego of a mere superhero. Bill's first series, NERVOUS REX, appeared in 1985 and starred a pint-sized Tyrannosaurus rex who loves oatmeal and is afraid of everything — especially his domineering wife, Dearie. It was a classic story of love, hate and mush. Bill and I met and became friends when I sold him some story ideas for REX #10. This issue was so spectacularly successful that the series was promptly canceled — apparently on the theory that nothing could top it. Currently —

Wm. VAN HORN

"I spent four years in college getting a degree in

except for an occasional children's book — Bill's time is spent drawing and writing Donald Duck and Uncle Scrooge comics for Gladstone Publishing. In addition, he illustrates all my Gladstone duck scripts. As usual, Bill and I spoke long distance in our continuing effort to ensure that the phone company has at least three cubic acres of our money.

JOHN LUSTIG: *I know you grew up reading Carl Barks' early Donald Duck comics. Did you ever dream about drawing Donald yourself someday?*

WILLIAM VAN HORN: Not for a minute! Actually, as a kid, I didn't think about them being drawn by anybody. They just appeared. There was never a name on them.

JOHN: *When did you realize you could make a living doing comics?*

BILL: Reading **Chester Gould's** DICK TRACY did it for me. I ran into the comic strip in 1951 for the first time. It had **Gould's** name on it — and I went ape over it. I realized people actually sat there and drew pictures and made a living. I happened to find an old LIFE magazine profile on **Gould** at that time too. And that really brought it home to me that this was just a guy. That really got me going in terms of thinking that I was going to be a professional. I was about 12, I guess.

JOHN: *Didn't the old Disneyland TV show influence your career as well?*

BILL: Yeah, when that first came on television in 1954 it turned me on to the idea of animation. I basically got side-tracked into animation from there on. Although I spent four years in college getting a degree in commercial illustration, I had no intention of using it. I wanted to be in animation and go to Disney. But the year I graduated – which was January of 1961 – Disney had just closed down much of its operation. So I said, "Hell, I'm not going down there. I'll just end up pumping gas." I was due to be drafted anyway so I stayed in San Francisco.

But, yeah — that all came out of the Disney television thing. When I was in college we made our own film. I more-or-less taught myself everything I needed to know because in those days they didn't have film courses at least not in our college. Now, they have them in high schools for crying out loud!

JOHN: *After you were drafted you were an illustrator for the Army, right?*

BILL: Right.

JOHN: *Well, at least it kept you out of the motor pool.*

BILL: Yeah, quite literally. My two highest scores in basic training were in

NERVOUS REX #10 "The Milk of Amnesia."

© 1989 Wm. Van Horn

commercial illustration; I had no intention of using it."

automotive — which mystified me because I still don't know what happens beyond turning the key in the ignition — and cryptography. I didn't really have any interest in that. And I did have a college degree in illustration. I had worked for a year. So I simply told the Army, "Hey, I want to be an illustrator!"

I was just barely smart enough to know that the Army had such a job. They didn't know. They had to look it up. But, once this sergeant discovered that there was indeed such a job, he said, "Well, fine. I'll recommend you."

So he did and I went straight up to Ft. Lewis, Washington, from basic training. The Army didn't bother wasting any more time training me.

JOHN: *So, how did you get into animation from there?*

BILL: Well, I had been in animation for a year prior to going into the Army. So, when I came out, I spotted around in it here and there in little jobs. I wound up working in a direct mail house for awhile doing print work before I could get into animation full time. That happened in the latter part of 1965 and I stayed in it until 1977.

JOHN: *I know you eventually became part-owner of Aesop Films, but even before that weren't you wearing more than one hat at the studio?*

BILL: Right, I basically did every job from polishing cels to doing character voices. We were a small studio of about 12 employees. They couldn't have paid any of us to do the jobs we did if we went by union scale. I was a director more than anything else. I was head of the animation department. That was the title, but in fact — yeah, I had to be able to do it all.

JOHN: *So, it was just like working for a small newspaper.*

BILL: Yeah, exactly. There were no specialists.

JOHN: *So, how did you eventually come to sell the studio and move to Canada?*

BILL: Well, the business climate closed us down more than anything else. Actually we made more money selling off the studio lease than we ever did making movies.

JOHN: *What about the move up to Canada?*

BILL: Well, that came about three years later. My wife, Elaine, is from eastern Canada, but she has a brother and an aunt here in British Columbia. So we came up for a visit in 1978. We liked it. And in 1980 we moved here.

JOHN: *The reason I ask is that I've heard people refer to you as a Canadian.*

BILL: Uh, yeah.

JOHN: *I've even heard people at Gladstone refer to you as a Canadian.*

BILL: Well, that's where I hear it. As a matter of fact I just picked up an old Gladstone comic that I didn't have and the editor, **Byron Erickson,** is talking about me as "our Canadian artist." No, I'm a California boy. I live in Canada, but I wouldn't have the temperament to be Canadian. They're too laid back! *(Laughter.)*

JOHN: *Not go-getters like Californians? (Laughter.)*

BILL: Well, maybe not as temperamental.

JOHN: *Let's talk about your comics career. I know you started out with Blackthorne. How did that come about?*

BILL: After I got out of the Army, things were really slow in animation and I was bouncing around. So I sent some Donald Duck and Uncle Scrooge stuff to Western Printing in Beverly Hills — and got nowhere with them. Mainly because what I sent down was such crap. They were, you know, polite about it and said we don't really work with artists unless they're reasonably close by — if not in the building. *(Laughter.)*

The comic book industry at that time was kind of winding down — especially the funny animal stuff. So I felt that the things I do -- or could do -- just weren't the kinds of things that were going to have a place. I know how egocentric this sounds, but I figured the industry would have to evolve toward me and that I would never evolve toward it.

Well, by God, that's exactly what happened in the '80s with the rise of the alternative publishers. All of a sudden there were people out there who would look at something that I would do. So I wrote and drew NERVOUS REX. In 1984 I sent it to Pacific Comics. They got

VITAL STATISTICS

Name: William Van Horn
Born: 15 February 1939 — Oakland, CA
Residence: North Vancouver, BC, Canada
Current Occupation: Writer/artist — comic books & children's books
Comic book credits: Many Gladstone comics, including DUCKTALES, DONALD DUCK and UNCLE SCROOGE. For other publishers — NERVOUS REX, TRACKER, POSSIBLEMAN and "Angst" in CRITTERS
Children's Book Credits: HARRY HOYLE'S SLIPPERY SHADOW, THE WIGGLY WOBBLY BOAT RIDE, THE BIG SNEEZE and several others
Former Occupation: 14 years in animation directing, writing and drawing. Won five Cine Golden Eagles and numerous film festival awards. Eventually became co-owner of Aesop Films. Occasionally worked with Disney old-timers.
All-Time Favorite Comic Book: WALT DISNEY'S COMICS AND STORIES
Favorite Movie: CHINATOWN
Pet Peeves: Flies and politicians
Silliest Thing Ever Done: "Probably becoming a cartoonist"

"I remember Carl Barks used to write notes to

rather interested in it — and then they promptly went out of business. Six months later I was still trying to get my stuff back. When they closed down I guess they must have felt that lawyers were looking for them behind every door because I couldn't get through to anybody. Finally I just called **Cat Yronwode** down at Eclipse and asked her if she had a phone number for Pacific's owner, **Steve Schanes**. She said, "Sure." So I called **Schanes** up and he said, "Oh, yeah, I know who you are. We want to do NERVOUS REX bi-monthly."

I didn't even know that **Schanes** had started a new company. I didn't know anything about Blackthorne. All I'd been trying to do was get my samples back so I could send them somewhere else. But Blackthorne did publish NERVOUS REX and it ran 10 issues.

JOHN: *After REX folded, I know you did a couple of other series for Blackthorne and some work for Fantagraphics, but all that seems to be on hold now.*

BILL: That's true. I had to stop working with Fantagraphics. Not because I wanted to, but just because there's no time. The ducks are virtually full time now.

JOHN: *Yet, it fascinates me that — well, I do a bit of writing for you — but other than that you're doing all your own writing — as well as everything else — the pencilling, the inking, the lettering — even the coloring.*

BILL: Well, basically I do it because it gives me the greatest degree of control over what comes out in print. I personally don't care for the lettering style that they use at Gladstone. It's just not my style. So I'd rather put up with the agony of lettering. As far as the coloring goes — well, that's just kind of fun. It provides a little break in the schedule and again for the most part it comes out the way I want it.

I remember **Carl Barks** used to write notes to Western that because of a gag a certain object had to be colored green. But then, when the issue was published, the object was colored orange. Those sorts of things do happen. But this way, by doing a fully colored page, I pretty much control that — unless I happen to use a color Gladstone can't get. I had a tan tent come out purple in one story because I didn't know that they couldn't get that particular color.

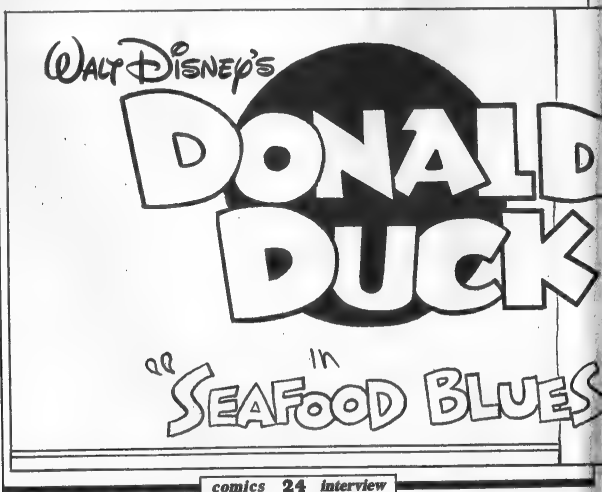
JOHN: *I know that you take deadlines real seriously. You're always ahead of schedule and so forth . . .*

BILL: Except when I'm behind.

JOHN: *(Laughter.) But during your first year of doing the ducks you were often under the gun doing fill-in work that Gladstone wanted immediately — if not yesterday. Was that frustrating?*

BILL: Well, I didn't mind it so much at first because I wasn't doing that much else at that time. But then — all of a sudden — four freelance projects were approved in a two of three week period and the word was "GO." All of a sudden I had these other schedules to worry about. But in the early duck stuff it wasn't too much of a problem.

JOHN: *You started out with Gladstone doing filler material — stories that were anywhere from one to four pages long.*



Western that a certain object had to be colored green."

Were those harder to do than the longer stories you generally do now?

BILL: No, I wouldn't say they're harder. They're just different. I determined for myself that they had to have a straight, pretty linear continuity without too many "meanwhiles" and other complications. But I found them to be an excellent training ground.

JOHN: *Oh, I agree. I've done some — and I certainly agree.*

BILL: In fact, I like the way things worked out with Gladstone. It's the first place that I ever approached that put me at the bottom of the ladder and let me work my way up. In every other situation I always started out at the top and worked my way down. *(Laughter.)* It happened in film. I got right out of college and was doing a theatrical film — when I didn't know half what I was doing. My first children's book sold. The very first thing I sent to a publisher and it was "All right! Let's do it!" And then when I made my very first comic book submission I was told that I had my very own bi-monthly comic series. It's kind of ridiculous because I'm suddenly put in the position of having to produce things and I don't know what I'm doing. So at Gladstone I started with one-pagers and four-pagers. It was on a slower basis and I got a chance to learn how to draw these guys — at least enough to get by.

JOHN: *Well, you've now got a schedule for much of your stuff. You've got a regular slot in DUCKTALES which comes out eight times a year . . .*

BILL: . . . and I'm supposed to fill up the other four months with stories for WALT DISNEY'S COMICS AND STORIES, plus some covers and whatever else I can do. They seemed to have opened up quite a bit in terms of scheduling original material.

JOHN: *Like Barks you're coming to this material with a background in animation. Does that background shape your approach in any way?*

BILL: Oh, definitely! The strength of **Barks'** panels especially in the early years -- is that they were set up as if they were frames of film or storyboards. **Barks** translated that basic concept straight into comic books. In motion pictures as well as comic books you have to be so aware of your composition at all times. It's just part of the training. **Barks** got it by storyboarding and by having to think about the demands of the camera. And that's basically what my experience was. It makes it easier to lay things out cleanly. At least, I hope my stuff is reasonably clean and understandable. In film you don't have time for murky layouts and business that's unessential to what's going on.

JOHN: *But I know that another big influence on your work is KRAZY KAT which would almost seem to be the antithesis of a straight, linear sort of storyline.*

BILL: Well, not really. There's a basic simplicity in **Herriman** — the cross-hatching and all that aside — there's a very direct, almost naive simplicity in his work. I first saw KRAZY KAT when I was in my 20s and it had a tremendous effect on me

JOHN: *I saw a lot of that influence in NERVOUS REX. For people who aren't*

"Of all the silly Billys . . . you are by far the silliest."

familiar with it — well, I guess you'd say it was about a henpecked tyrannosaurus named Rex.

BILL: Right! A king of dinosaurs who couldn't fill the position effectively — at least never in his wife's eyes. He never tore anyone to pieces and that immediately put him in his wife's bad book because she was basically a social climber and wanted to be thought of as a queen. Which was hard to do with a little wimp of a husband.

JOHN: *KRAZY KAT's influence on REX was really obvious. It's not as apparent in your duck stories, but there's still something similar.*

BILL: I suppose it's the silliness. Let's see, I used a line about "bubble gum factories in Bulgaria" in an Uncle Scrooge story. There's a certain incongruous feeling about something like that because I can't imagine anyone in Bulgaria even chewing bubble gum — let alone producing it. There's a silliness like that in KRAZY KAT, but there's also a silliness in most of the strips and artists who've influenced me. If it's silly that's the biggest influence of all.

JOHN: *You're just a silly kind of guy.*

BILL: When I was graduating from grammar school we had to make these little autograph books. My sixth grade teacher signed mine and I've never forgotten what she wrote: "To Billy, Of all the silly Billy's I've ever known you are by far the silliest."

And you know it was pretty true then – because I was basically silly and I'm still basically silly. But now it manifests itself more in stories or artwork rather than in making faces in the classes or something.

JOHN: *Now, you're professionally silly.*

BILL: Right. Now I don't have to bring a note home that says, "Billy was silly today. Do something about it." Now if I'm not silly it's bad

JOHN: *You've got a very different approach from someone like Don Rosa who is the other artist/writer who's been doing the ducks for Gladstone. The thing that first struck me when I saw your stories is that there's a sort of whimsical factor to your work.*

BILL: Yeah, that better be there — or at least I try to get it there. *(Laughter.)*

JOHN: *It seems to me that Rosa is a little more plot oriented than you are. While with you it's not so much what the ducks do or say, but how they say it and how they do it.*

BILL: In most of the things I do I try to rely on the development of character to the extent possible. Obviously Donald, Scrooge and the rest of the ducks are fairly well established characters. It's not like NERVOUS REX or my "Angst" stories in CRITTERS where I can do anything I want. In "Angst" the whole thing is character. There's almost nothing going on. It's just a character study. That's the sort of thing I enjoy. Now **Rosa** enjoys spectacle. I sort of think of **Rosa** as the **Cecil B. DeMille** of ducks heavy on spectacle and heavy on plot, but a little thin on warmth.

JOHN: *I can't see any one person making the ducks their own any more — not the way Barks did. In some ways, I kind of like the idea of people taking different approaches.*

BILL: Oh, I think the readers do too. I think it shows up in the letter columns and the sales. Now, some people who write in are **Barks** purists and they think all of us stink — except **Barks**. And that's fine. That's as valid an opinion as any. I mean I saw a letter from someone saying he thought I was the world's worst duck artist. And I didn't really disagree with

Carl Barks provided this self-portrait for San Diego's 1974 comic convention booklet.

"Donald is just a guy. He's like everybody — everyman."

©1988 Wm. Van Horn

NERVOUS REX #10 "Persondacity."

him - at least based on what he was seeing of my first duck stories. They do make me cringe a bit when I see them. But the bottom line is to sell the comic books regardless of your style. If they sell then something is being done right.

JOHN: *What is it about Barks' stories that makes them so special?*

BILL: They're very universal. Donald is just a guy. He's like everybody. He's Everyman. And the series had a family orientation. It features Donald and his nephews and their problems. These stories are popular all over the world because there's never anything in them that's arcane or typically just American. They feature universal themes.

JOHN: *There's a basic sense of humanity in the stories.*

BILL: Yes, I think so. Plus, I think — particularly in the earlier days — the stories were very visual, very graphically dynamic. When I was a little kid I would look at the stories and remember them - even before I could read.

One of my favorites was when the ducks fell into the Grand Canyon. If you're six years old that's a really dynamic piece of business. And, as it happened that year, I was at the Grand Canyon. So it had a double impact. Maybe that's why it's one of my favorites

Now some criticism has been leveled at the early **Barks** stories because they're supposedly too derivative of the animated cartoons. I don't believe that. They were very, very strong. In fact some of the strongest scripts and drawings were in the first three or four years.

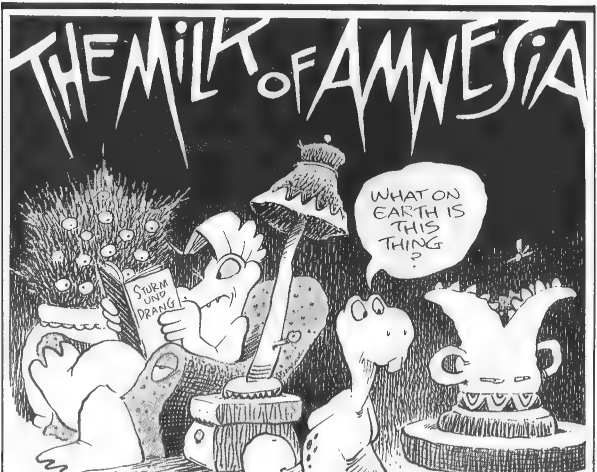
Later on the characterizations became more sophisticated. There was more depth in the later things and I think that's what some of the writers and pundits are responding to. I think that stuff is great too. But those earlier stories are so graphic! Whether it was a rocket to the Moon or a nightmare, it was always very graphic. The later stories tended to deal with subtler themes such as competition between lovers for Daisy's hand.

JOHN: *Are you intimidated by following in Barks' footsteps?*

BILL: Actually I'm not following in his footsteps as much as in his seat prints. We all just sit and do this. *(Laughter.)*

But, no, it doesn't intimidate me. I'm inspired by what he did. But at the same time I'm mindful there's a real danger of just imitating him. I don't want to rehash everything **Barks** did. I don't think that's what any of us should be doing. But I do admit that I can pick up some **Barks** stories and look at them and say, "Oh my

"We had this one guy who always played the women's



"The Milk of Amnesia," from NERVOUS REX #10.

God! I'm not doing anything that good."

But still, what can you do? You sit down and write something that pleases yourself that you think is true to the characters. From there on, you just hope readers agree with you.

JOHN: *The key to everything seems to be knowing how the characters should act.*

BILL: Animators have always been called "actors with pencils." I think the same thing is true of the best comic strip and comic book artists. Being able to act things out is very valuable. In my own case, when we were kids we used to play act everything. We'd see a movie that excited us and we had to work off this adrenaline — this steam you'd built up. So we acted everything out. If we saw a movie — we did it. We had this one guy who always played the women's roles. We always had people who played different parts. I also made most of the props. All of that stood me in very good stead — that and three years of drama training during high school — which was a fairly sophisticated course at the time. And I always did leading roles.

Later on, I did some character voices when I was doing animation. And that also helped me when I was "acting" with a pencil. Some people have said, "We like your work because of the expressions on the characters' faces." Well all that is is acting. Now I'm only bringing this up as an aside, because people are always talking about "What artists influenced you? What style influenced you?" And those things are there, but it was this play acting that had a major impact. I had a choice really. Was I going to be an actor or an artist? Since I was lazy and I didn't want to go anywhere I figured being an artist was easier.

JOHN: *You didn't have to work for a living.*

BILL: Yeah! *(Laughter.)*

JOHN: *Speaking about acting, I know you're into old radio shows. The language in some of the comedies such as BURNS AND ALLEN, JACK BENNY and oh, the name eludes me . . .*

BILL: FIBBER MCGEE AND MOLLY.

JOHN: *Yes! FIBBER MCGEE AND MOLLY is a perfect example. In those shows, they make very clever uses of language and it's done at a level — compared to what's on TV these days — that's just astounding. And I see a lot of word play in your work. A real love of language.*

BILL: Yeah, that's the only thing that makes it fun to do — because writing is such a pain in the ass. I just finished reading a biography of **Dorothy Parker** and she hated to write. And she's been quoted — I don't know whether rightly or wrongly — as saying, "I hate to write. I love having written."

JOHN: *Right!*

BILL: In the book that was never mentioned so maybe it's not a true quote from her. I hate to write too, but if I'm going to have to do it then I'm going to

roles. I made most of the props and did leading roles."

have to make it fun somehow.

JOHN: *I was going to ask you what you enjoy more — drawing or writing.*

BILL: Oh, I hate all of it! *(Laughter.)* In regard to the radio shows, though, I've noticed something peculiar. I don't know if anyone has ever asked **Barks** about it, but there's an amazing parallel between the FIBBER MCGEE shows and the duck stories. Fibber McGee is essentially Donald Duck. They are very similar characters. They're both braggarts. They both bite off more than they can chew. They both think they know everything — when they usually know nothing. And there's show after show in '46 and '47 and '48 that sound like Donald Duck. They have the same themes. The same things are happening. Fibber decides he's going to fly a kite and nobody knows how to fly a kite better than he does. Well, of course, things don't work out. Well, time after time these are the same things that are in the **Barks** stories. And I've often wondered: How influenced was **Barks** by radio? I know he's been quoted as saying that for years, while he was working, he'd listen to cowboy music.

JOHN: *I never thought about it, but I see what you're talking about. Both are characters who take on more than they can possibly handle competently — and it's always what gets them into trouble.*

BILL: And it's always simple, simple things. And that's one of the things that makes the duck stories so great. They're simple. You know exactly where you stand. You know exactly what you're dealing with.

JOHN: *Let's talk about DUCKTALES since you're doing the comic book now. Many of the TV episodes are loosely based on the Barks comics. Yet, there are some definite differences. Some I like, some I don't. For one thing, the TV characters are written and drawn to be "cuter." Are you looking to the comic books for tone or are you looking more toward the TV show?*

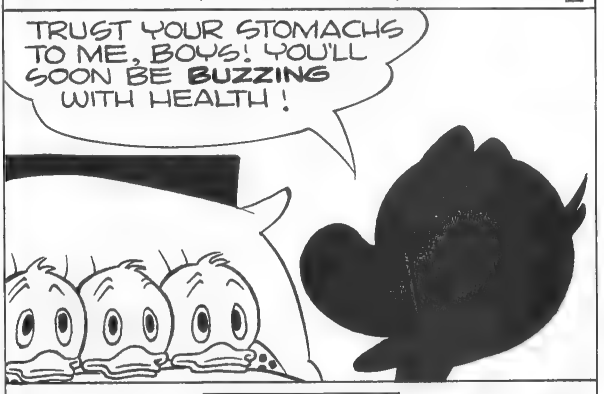
BILL: I only saw the first two-hour episode and part of another one and that's about it. Frankly, I'd rather not be overly influenced by what they're doing on TV — since print is an utterly different medium. The irony in DUCKTALES is that Donald isn't in them — not really. Why? Because he squawks.

The main character — the Donald surrogate — is Launchpad McQuack. At least I see him that way. He may not be that way in the TV series. But I don't want him to be just this simple-minded bozo in the comics who does nothing but brag about how good of a pilot he is and then proceeds to crash the plane. I would rather that he be capable of a little more in print. Because that's a very limited sort of gag. It makes for good action in film, but in a comic book where you can stare at it for 20 minutes it tends to pall on you after awhile. So I'm trying to just write stories that I think are fun. I want them to be stories that readers enjoy and — hopefully — get their money's worth out of. And I'm pretty much letting it go at that.

Of course, I also have to be aware that certain characters — such as Launchpad — have to appear in every story.

In regard to their appearance, I've been given model sheets for the characters as they appear on the show. But some things have to be changed when you get into print. You mentioned "cuteness." Well being adorable — in terms of appearance and expression — is all right in film. But in print, again, it just sits there and you have a little too much time to pore over it. For example, the model sheets for Huey, Dewey and Louie are absolutely nothing like **Barks'** version. Personally, I feel **Barks'** Huey, Dewey and Louie were far more human and far more capable of subtle expression. So, I've compromised. I've put a little more ruffle in their headfeathers and I curved their cap lines like the TV models, but otherwise I've tried to go back a little closer to the **Barks** look.

And that's important because the way a character looks helps establish the tone of a story. .



"VALERIAN has a fairly wide range

JEAN-CLAUDE MEZIERES

Quiet settles over Paris on Sunday mornings, broken only by the tolling of bells. This particular Sunday the renowned French artist Mezieres gave up his customary game of soccer — Artists versus Writers — to give us a guided tour of the world of VALERIAN and other of his creations. Perhaps because his wife is American, he has an eloquent command of the English language, and this together with his constant enthusiasm for his work combined for a most absorbing experience . . .

DAVID ANTHONY KRAFT: *You're really at the top of the French comic-book field —?*

JEAN-CLAUDE MEZIERES: One of them at the top. *(Laughter.)*

DAK: *Who else would you say is at the top of the French field?*

MEZIERES: Well, *first* you have to make a difference; if you want to make a combination of French and Belgian and Swiss — thus is French-language comic strips — and this makes a big difference. The production of France is very important and has been very important in the last 20 years, but Belgian French-speaking and Flemish-speaking artists have been *tremendous* and have influenced all of the European comic strips for 50 years.

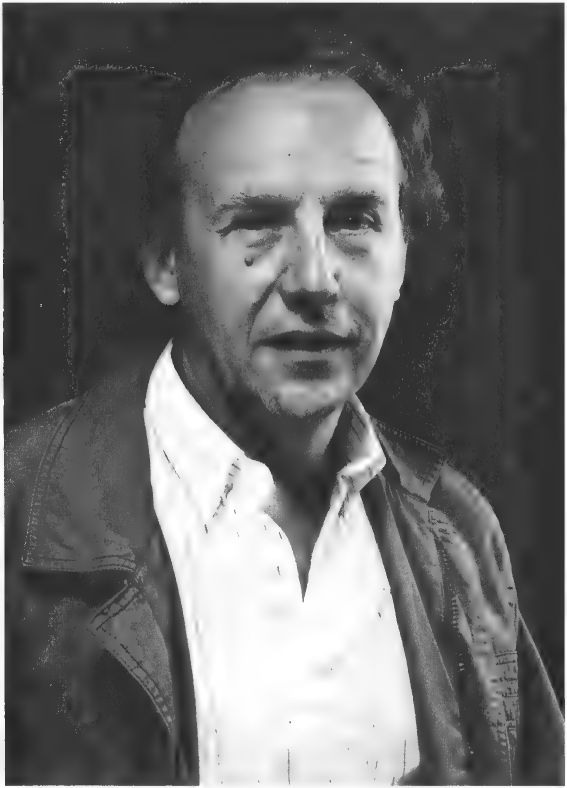
So, to answer your question, right now we have to deal with the very *young* and very famous people, like **Enki Bilal** — who is a good friend of mine — or you have to speak of those who are, you know, very famous people, **Herge, Jacobs** and **Franquin.** So you have to make a difference if you want to speak of the top, in between those *dinosaurs*, you might say, who made such a tremendous success,

All art © 1987-88 Jean-Claude Mezieres, unless otherwise noted.

NEW YORK!
LES BAGNOLES LONGUES COMME DES WAGONS, LES ENSEIGNES DE NEONS FOUS ET, TOUT AU FOND DES CANYONS DE BETON DE VERRE, ET D'ACIER, LA FOULE : POUMES, CAMES, FLIQUES, PEDES, TORDUS, BASSES, MAL BASSES ... ET TOUTES LES CONNERIES DE NOS JOURNAUX FRANCAIS SUR LA "VIOLENCE U.S."...
MAIS AUSSI LE CONTRAIRE, L'AUTRE IMAGE DE CETTE VILLE CHAOTIQUE ET FLUANTE, UNE IMAGE OÙ LES RAPPORTS HUMAINS SONT MOINS FIGES QU'AILLEURS...
NEW YORK! LA VILLE OÙ TOUT N'EMBLE POSSIBLE !
W 86 ST
DON'T WALK

Panel from Jean-Claude's "Mon Amerique" (PILOTE, 1974).

of readers, from kids to doctors."



"I was with Moebius in the same art school."

and say the other generation — people like **Moebius** or **Bilal** or **Tardi** or myself or many others.

DAK: *You would say that's the new generation?*

MEZIERES: Yes, the next generation after; famous but nothing to compare with the *millions* of copies sold with ASTERIX, for example.

DAK: *Or at least not yet.*

MEZIERES: No, it's not the same product. The older generation, the dinosaurs, produced very high quality comic strips for *everybody;* there's no aim to a certain audience, everybody can read TINTIN.

JULIA MATHER: *Like PEANUTS.*

MEZIERES: Like PEANUTS, exactly. Everybody likes GASTON, it was fantastically funny and clever, even political. One of the Socialist presidential candidates was on a very well known talk show about literature and he introduced **Franquin,** who came as a guest, a special guest — can you imagine a political candidate bringing a comic-strip writer! *(Laughter.)* But anyway, those very famous comic strips are acceptable for almost everybody.

The younger generation has specialized more to a certain type of story where it's more their own. If you speak about **Tardi,** who is very well known, it *isn't* aimed at everybody. People like **Tardi** because of his drawing, but the quality of his stories are grim and desperate — even with very funny colors and nice drawing — so not everybody likes **Tardi.** For myself, VALERIAN has a fairly wide range of readers, from kids twelve years old to doctors and lawyers — it's one of the widest range series — but *still* some people don't like that style of science fiction. It's more personal research, to take the concept of creating your *own* comic strip with your *own* ideas — with the idea of reaching many people of course. So the younger generation is more personal, with the idea to create something a bit more *personal* than those very good old comic strips which pleased almost everybody.

DAK: *I think that has happened in a lot of areas. We're in the information age now, where we're able to communicate and transmit and receive information very fast in many forms, so maybe that makes it possible for everybody to go their own way.*

MEZIERES: Yeah. That's why the sales of those books, if you compare to the *millions* of copies sold of ASTERIX, a very nice success like VALERIAN is 100,000 or maybe 150,000 copies — a very *big* difference!

DAK: *And what is the low end of the market?*

MEZIERES: I think it could be 2,000 or 3,000 copies, it's difficult to say. It's different if it's a black-and-white book or if it's a color book, because the cost of printing color means you have to sell more, maybe between 3,000 and 5,000 copies. Even *who* is publishing it, if it's Dargaud or if it's a very small publisher, it makes a big difference.

DAK: *We had explained to us that distribution in France is completely different from the States, that here some of the larger publishers have their own distribution, and I guess a smaller publisher would have to go with a larger one to distribute?*

MEZIERES: Yes, that's what happens for many people. And then you have the distribution of the newsstands which — they don't sell albums — but it's a nationwide distribution. They can sell some small magazines, not all of them. But the distribution system is very efficient in many big publishing companies.

DAK: *That's a complete opposite of the United States.*

MEZIERES: But the territory is a little bit smaller. *(Laughter.)* That's maybe the explanation.

DAK: *When talking about the different generations of artists, what sort of changes have you seen in the field from the time before you started and now?*

MEZIERES: Well, I would say there are three different steps. When I was fifteen years old, you know, I was with **Moebius, (Jean Giraud),** in the same art school — we are fifteen and we are sitting almost next to each other — so we were always interested in comic strips, and already practicing drawing comic strips, and starting publishing small things in small magazines. Well, not that small in fact, but *nobody* paid attention to comic strips

One of the thirteen caricatures of Jean-Claude by some of the "greats" from across the sea. This one is by Moebius.

"ASTERIX made the front cover of the French NEWSWEEK."

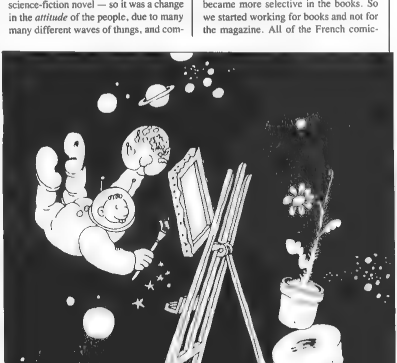
— Jean-Claude by Bilal —

at that time. I mean people were reading TINTIN already, and SPIROU was beginning, but it was not in fashion.

Then ten years later, by '65, Gosciny and Uderzo had already produced a few ASTERIX, and that year people started speaking about ASTERIX; and ASTERIX made the front cover of L'EXPRESS, which was the French NEWSWEEK at the time. It was the recognition that *something* was happening with comic strips, adults were admitting they were reading some comic strips. And in the same time as ASTERIX was published by PILOTE, a magazine for young readers, teen readers, Gosciny had the bright idea to tell the cartoonists, "Do what you like, do what you please." He was not thinking of *my* readers, *our* readers, just try for you. I was just coming back from America and was just starting publishing things in PILOTE, and after a few tries and experiments we produced the first pages of VALERIAN. Science fiction was *not* popular, was *not* well known, but Gosciny said okay. He did that to everybody.

That's how the readers of PILOTE, a very big number, grew up still reading the same magazine for maybe ten years, instead of reading it for three or four years and then you change the generation, you know. The magazine became more adult. Then '68 arrived and the student movement, the student revolution, and of course comics was at the heart of the expression, the graffiti on the walls, the graphic posters It was a change of social expression. Comics in France were not *appreciated* because it was not *culture*, but it became *popular* culture. The change in thought was in '68, they expressed the thought that you can find interest in a comic strip as much as in a thriller or in a science-fiction novel — so it was a change in the *attitude* of the people, due to many many different waves of things, and comics were read by many people.

Then Dargaud, one of the most important publishers of that time, started putting out *books* — before there were very few, maybe ten titles — where the stories drawn for the magazine were put into albums, and those albums started selling very widely! The first album of VALERIAN was maybe 10,000 copies or something, but it sold nicely. Then we did another story — still for the magazine — and it sold. Then the process of the '70s became that more publishers would publish more books, and of course the authors were making a little money with the royalties, so the idea became selling books instead of working for a magazine. The magazine was prepublishing two pages each week, then as a monthly magazine six to eight pages each month, and the magazines lost their interest — why buy slices of sausages if you can buy the whole sausage six months later! *(Laughter.)* And then the selection, of course, because in the magazine you had many different stories, *some* you like, *some* you don't, so people became more selective in the books. So we started working for books and not for the magazine. All of the French comic-



— Jean-Claude by Tardi —

"Comics in France were not appreciated.

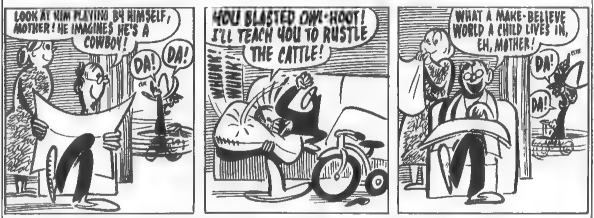
© 1985-88 Jack Davis

Yet, another of Jean-Claude's distant influences: Jack Davis. This detailed piece was used for television promotion of the "Daniel Boone" series (from Disney).

book magazines right now are in fairly bad shape. So this is one explanation of the evolution.

We could, of course, deal more with social expression, of comics about subculture say, read not by intellectual but by mass people, and then we changed to reach with the students, and artists coming from a very low class say. If you were a rich kid you would dream of being either a novel writer or working for movies or theatre, but for *us*, we could express ourselves with very little expense, and we get *paid* for that. So it became a generation of very popular artists, because we were expressing ourselves through a very *easy* medium to reach people, and it was very *personal*. That's the French mind of doing something on your *own*, of course. Even if you're trying to look like the artist you like in the beginning, afterwards it's going to be from the self — so that's why you get so much diversity of expression and styles. Everyone wants to be his own self.

DAK: *I think everybody starts by admiring somebody and working because they're*


LOOK AT HIM PLAYING BY HIMSELF, MOTHER! HE IMAGINES HE'S A COWBOY!
DA! DA!
YOU BLASTED OWL-HOOT! I'LL TEACH YOU TO RUSTLE THE CATTLE!
WHAT A MAKE-BELIEVE WORLD A CHILD LIVES IN, EH, MOTHER!
DA!
DA!

© 1988 Harvey Kurtzman

One of Jean-Claude's original influences, the work of Harvey Kurtzman (story: Genius).

The change in thought was in '68."

inspired by them. When you started whose work were you looking at?

MEZIERES: Yeah. Let's see, in my teen years I was influenced, of course, by **Herge,** and in the same time by **Franquin** and by **Morris** and by **Jacobs** — the very French and Belgian artists. Then, of course, meeting **Giraud,** I was impressed by *his* drawing and the love of the West, of cowboy stories by **Gige** — fantastic art, he was the master of **Giraud** for a very short while, and definitely **Giraud's** BLUEBERRY comes from **Gige's** JERRY SPRING. **Gige** has been a very close friend of **Franquin** and of **Morris,** he was a little bit older, he died nine years ago, and he's been the *father* of many many many artists. He was not very successful, he was very successful among his peers, and a whole generation of artists say **Gige** was a very great many for inspiring. I was influenced very much by his work. But also I was influenced by MAD MAGAZINE and **Harvey Kurtzman, Mort Drucker, Jack Davis.** So I've read a little of everything, and of course in the beginning was clumsy and then became me. *(Laughter.)*

DAK: *Do you keep up with what's being done in the field here and in other places?*

MEZIERES: Yes and no. Yes, I know more or less what's being produced, but I don't read comics anymore because I have no interest of the drawing — I go, "Ue, that's shit!" *(Laughter.)* I think most of the production in France is not very good right now, but most of the production of any sort of art is not very different If you speak of the total production of the movies,90% of it is shit, and comics is the same. There is very low quality with a few that are interesting and good.

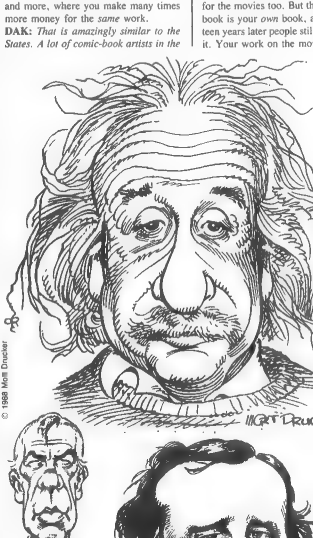
So, that was my generation — the third step, the young generation is people like **Bilal** and even people younger than **Bilal** now, who started in the world of comic strips *knowing* it's fantastic. It's fame, you know. There was a survey made for young people in the schools, asking them what they wanted to be, and the first, of course, was to be a rock star, and *then* was author of comic strips — which is something very very different from being a rock star, I tell you! *(Laughter.)*

DAK: *It's very funny to hear you say that With the conventions in the States, maybe the money isn't the same, but it's like when the rock stars perform in the different cities and keep meeting each other on the circuit.*

MEZIERES: Yeah. So this new generation came to comic strips *knowing* it was a prestigious thing and you can come on television, not very often, and you go to festival and you sign your name — but it's hard work, that's what they discover afterwards. *(Laughter.)* So some keep on, and some others who are very gifted don't think they make enough money, because you don't make that much money, and they go to advertising because advertising is using comic-strip artists now more and more, where you make many times more money for the *same* work.

DAK: *That is amazingly similar to the States. A lot of comic-book artists in the U.S. now are storyboarding for the movies or going into advertising, because when they weigh how much they get paid for those things and for comics, the difference is tremendous — they can't afford to do the comics except out of love for comics.*

MEZIERES: Yeah, I've been working for the movies too. But the thing is your book is your *own* book, and ten and fifteen years later people still buy it and like it. Your work on the movies disappears



The art of Mad Magazine's Mort Drucker.

"The idea became selling books instead of working for a magazine."

into the work of everybody else. It can be very exciting in the beginning, but then afterwards you find what you've been producing is totally absent and anonymous. It's very seldom in movies you get anything more, when you get the chance to work with somebody who wants to work with *you*.

DAK: *So, what have you done in movies?*

MEZIERES: A little bit, two or three projects One project was with **Jeremy Kaygan,** who came to Paris and we had a very good working relationship, but the project unfortunately collapsed. It was a science-fiction story based on the novel of **Barjavel,** he's a very famous French writer, and the title was OUT OF TIME. And I worked for the first German/Soviet production of a science-fiction movie, which was something *very* exciting! *(Laughter.)* It's a science-fiction story taking place on a little sister planet of Earth during some sort of middle ages, so *our* Earth in the future perhaps two centuries *observes* that little planet and what's happening on it, this violent evolution — and of course they interfere. The subject was very interesting, I designed sets and costumes and a little bit of everything, and the director was **Peter Fleischmann** who is a very well known German movie director; but the movie had a lot of problems. Apparently they *are* shooting in the Soviet Union, I hope everything turns out for the best.

DAK: *And do you feel that your work will be, as you were saying, sort of lost?*

MEZIERES: I am pretty sure of that, I stopped my collaboration because they were not able to pay me. *(Laughter.)* I was really giving up my book I was working on to work on the movie, so they weren't able to pay me so I had to go back to my book. I produced a lot of work and I don't know what they will keep, what they will use. You know, costume design is something where you do a sketch or two and then they have more people working on the same ideas, so I don't know. I think for me it's finished. But I have a small project for **Jeremy Kaygan** still.

DAK: *Would that be live action or animated?*

MEZIERES: Oh, live action, everything is live action. Personally I *love* animated cartoons, but not from comic strips. Comic strip is one thing, animation is another, and to adapt a comic strip to animation is a terrible waste.

DAK: *Why do you think that?*

MEZIERES: Because most of the graphics of animation are not like most of the graphics of comic strips, so the look of the cartoons, like the ASTERIX adaptations, is not good at all. For me, I say no. Many people say why don't you do something with animation? Well, I have *other* projects I want to work on. I have been interested with video, I have been working on research, and I have ideas for projects.

DAK: *But you would design them specifically for that medium.*

MEZIERES: No, I would blend everything — why not blend *everything*

"Everyone wants to be his own self."

together to create something new!

DAK: *Do you see the American ROLLING STONE MAGAZINE?*

MEZIERES: I know the magazine but I don't see it, no.

DAK: *In their 20th anniversary issue they had an interview with Timothy Leary and he is involved now with computers, and he thinks that in the future you will have the ability to merge whatever you want from whatever you have, an episode of DALLAS and a MICKEY MOUSE cartoon for example, and create your own thing.*

MEZIERES: This is not what I am working on. I am still thinking of being the director and all that, the storyteller. All of the experiments I have seen right now are fascinating — beautiful new images — but the people who do it are *not* storytellers. *We* are the storytellers. All of the most fantastic images you can show, yes, but if you don't know what to *do* with them then after awhile that is not impressive. That's the big chance of the cartoonists, we know how to tell stories — and we're always ready to tell stories.

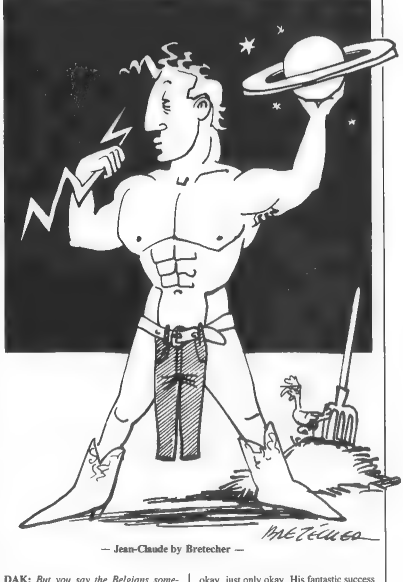
JULIA: *Do you do any work in collaboration, where you do the —*

MEZIERES: No. I work with a scriptwriter, my old friend **Pierre Christin,** a lifelong friend, we created VALERIAN together and he writes the dialogue. We discuss a lot about the stories, but he writes the dialogues and I do the drawing, and for the drawing I work all by myself — except for the colors, my sister does the coloring.

JULIA: *What is her name?*

MEZIERES: Evelyne Tran-Le, she's married to a **Japanese.** So I do the drawings in black and white, and she does the coloring on separate bluesheet, for VALERIAN. Otherwise I do my own coloring. But this VALERIAN book I'm working on is going to be 62 to 65 pages and that's a *lot* of work, especially working full-color. It's a different approach to the drawing itself! And for the story I'm telling, which is very complicated, very graphically detailed, I need to work in black and white and have the colors separate.

But I don't see how I can have somebody working *with* me, I don't know where I am *going*! *(Laughter.)* And we French *don't* do that. Belgians do that, some of them, but the French *don't.* We *all* want to sell as many copies as we can, but to produce as mass production is not done. This is probably a mistake, commercially speaking that's a mistake — I know that — but all the people I know, the *best* cartoonists I know, **Bilal, Schuiten,** are all by themselves.



— Jean-Claude by Bretecher —

DAK: *But you say the Belgians sometimes —*

MEZIERES: Well, when you speak about **Peyo,** THE SMURFS.

DAK: *I met Peyo very briefly at Marvel Comics many years ago, just to shake hands, and when I was in Belgium I didn't realize at first that that's where he was from. In talking to people about comics there, nobody ever mentioned his work or THE SMURFS. It was as if it was a separate thing.*

MEZIERES: Yeah, it's . Well, the success of THE SMURFS doesn't come from the books, it comes from the merchandising. I think his work — when I was a kid I was reading his work, I saw the first SMURFS when I was twelve — it was okay, just only okay. His fantastic success came from somebody else, not from him.

JULIA: *One thing we heard was somebody wanted him to do something, but he said, "I really wish I could but I just do not have the time. I don't have the time to do comics anymore, I'm now just a businessman." That was very very sad.*

MEZIERES: Well, let's say that I have never been impressed with his work. I think he's a good *craftsman,* but that's it. He's one of the very many Belgian craftsmen whose work was very much influenced by **Franquin's** work, in the beginning, and he was good only . . *(Telephone interruption.)*

DAK: *That was a good place to break, it was time to turn the tape over. So, you*

"It became a generation of very popular artists, because we were

COMMENT!?
JE N'A PAS NON PLUS!!! MAIS QU'EST-CE QUE C'EST QUE CE BISTROT ??? APPELEZ-MOI LE PATRON!!
ALORS, ALORS, QU'EST CE QU'IL SE PASSE !?
MAIS!!!
GRAG
ARGH
JE M'EN DOUTAIS UN ANDROÏDE!!
AH ELLE EST CHOUETTE LA CIVILISATION DES ESPACES INTERGALACTIQUES !... DES PSEUDO-HUMAINS EN FERRAILLE ET...

From "A SUIVRE" magazine (1978).

had mentioned that the Belgians sometimes worked —

MEZIERES: Yeah, **Herge** had a whole studio. Only *his* name appeared on the books, but he had collaborators. He had one of the greatest, **Jacobs**, working with him as a scriptwriter, sometimes, giving ideas. And even in the drawing and the coloring he had many others, so it was a studio. Some of the work was very good but to me at the end his production was very boring, because he was too much separated from it. Some of the best were made in collaboration with two or three people only, because of course you *need* contact with friends — *I* need to be in contact with many other cartoonists, to check what they do, to get ideas. But the work on the table I think should be done alone.

DAK: *And THE SMURFS after a while wasn't produced by Peyo*

MEZIERES: No, it's a *factory*. LUCKY LUKE is the same now, the new ones — *blech!* It's poorly imitated **Morris** drawing, that's what they are publishing. It's terrible

DAK: *We talked to Alain Baran at Foundation Herge and they decided to not attempt to continue the TINTIN books beyond Herge's death, even though they had the —*

MEZIERES: They could do it, yes, but that would be just business.

JULIA: *At Dargaud they said the two things they had continued distributing in the States were ASTERIX and VALERIAN, so it is still being distributed —*

MEZIERES: I suppose so. I've not been in America for awhile so I don't know, but it seems like it's not successful.

JULIA: *Anthea Shackleton at Dargaud said her sister lives in the States and told her she hadn't seen them anywhere, and I haven't seen any in bookshops I've been in.*

DAK: *Well — this is good to mention on the tape — she said that Dargaud had pulled back most of their material, what is now being published is just ASTERIX and VALERIAN and everything else that does appear is through the imprint of another publisher through licensing, but if people want to look up your books they are in the States. But they're not in the usual areas where people find comics, they end up in the children's section of bookstores in large cities, because the format is seen as bookstore material and the bookstores see comics as children's material.*

MEZIERES: Exactly

DAK: *So they are there, you have to look not in the adventure or science-fiction sections but in the children's section to find them — books that are not for children.* (Laughter.)

MEZIERES: I think they are working on a project of a small size of the book, more the size of MAUS, that format. But though the atmosphere in America has changed quite a lot, I think that my work would not be appreciated in America. In fact HEAVY METAL published some of my work, published one book, but they didn't continue because I think it was not

expressing ourselves through a very easy medium to reach people."

appreciated.

DAK: *Why do you think that is?*

MEZIERES: Because . . . *if* I know what the American comics are, and I don't know very well what they are, I suppose heroes are still heroes, and even if it's a *spoof* about heroes you still deal with the scenes of action and violence — in VALERIAN there's absolutely none of that. Graphically speaking it's very different, and I don't think the American audience likes that style of drawing, very European. And the stories are fairly sophisticated and *not* one way to the end, very complicated. I wish it would become very popular in America. Many people say, "Oh, oh, it will be a *great* success!" But I'm mature, I don't listen. Of course so many young people now are travelling and coming to Europe, so they *face* that new culture of comics in Europe, so because my books are translated into every language in Europe, in every country in Europe, they will meet VALERIAN. But would they like it? Really, I don't know.

JULIA: *Do you sell any books in England?*

MEZIERES: Yes.

JULIA: *Do they do very well?*

MEZIERES: I don't think so. To me England is not a country for comic strips. Maybe I'm wrong, but there's so many children's books that comic strips is very remote, very much like an American comic book, JUDGE DREDD and like that. So they publish four or five of my books in England, and I think they are selling, they are continuing to sell a little bit.

JULIA: *Does VALERIAN have ongoing characters in it?*

MEZIERES: Some, yes, but not all of them, not all the time.

JULIA: *It doesn't have one hero and it's his story as it goes* —

MEZIERES: Yeah, he meets people, and in the last two books we had . . . some sort of spies from outer space, very funny characters that we re-used because they were good, and we re-use some other people — but not always.

DAK: *I'm glad she asked that, I have to remember to ask you questions for people who may never have seen the material. How would you describe the VALERIAN series for people who have not seen it?*

MEZIERES: It's very *classical* in form, very TINTIN like . . . no, because my drawing doesn't *look* like TINTIN, but it's a very classical form of comic strip. It's absolutely different from American science-fiction comics, which personally I don't like very much, and very terse through the narrations. What interests me is not the drawing, because I think I'm not too bad an artist but not very good either, but what I'm good at is narration. I can really *tell* a story, show from one frame to another what's happening, and I love to show that. It's direction, it's a movie, I'm a movie director on my page, and that's what I'm really interested in.

And of course graphically speaking it's a mixture of humor and realism. It doesn't look very much . . . it's very hard to make a reference to anything, maybe to **Will Eisner**'s drawing, I would feel *some* kind of relation with his style.

DAK: *What would you say are the themes in your work? When you do a series with the same character, how do you keep each book new, fresh and different?*

MEZIERES: Well, that's because we try hard. *(Laughter.)* When we started VALERIAN many years ago we had absolutely no idea, of course, that we would make a serial of books — **Christin** was a university professor, and he's still a university professor, teaching journalism in Bordeaux. It was because he was an old friend of mine and he was always interested in comics and movies and popular literature that we worked together. I need somebody to speak with and create not on my own because I am getting in too many directions when I am all by myself, you know — so I want to have somebody to talk with, to bring ideas — and when we decided to make VALERIAN it was for one story only We had the freedom of creating what we wanted, no reference to documents, to history, to anything, and because we were fans of science fiction — he knew more than I knew about science fiction, he wrote some novels — we made one science-fiction story. It became fairly well received and we made another one, and then we realized that we were making a *series*. It was not, you know, a direction.

Science fiction has always interested us as the possibility of *changing* from one book to another. The rules of narration, that's what interested **Christin,** and in each book he tries a new rule of narration. I'm trying to not draw something I've always already drawn, to create something

— Jean-Claude by Blanc-Dumont —

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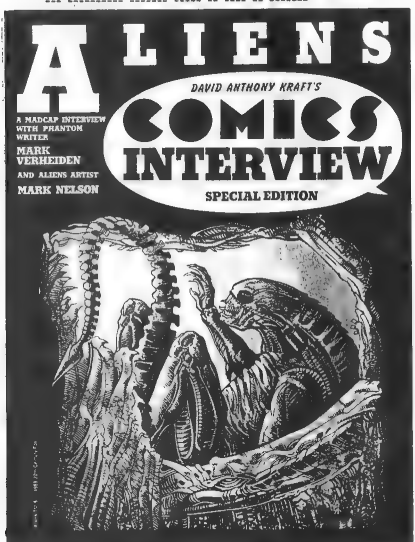

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"Most of the production in France is not very good right now."

new, to experiment.

DAK: *Over the years how many VALERIAN books have you produced?*

MEZIERES: I have produced 14, I'm working on the 15th; and another book I did with **Christin** which is something totally different, LADY POLARIS — have you heard anything of this? It's a graphic novel, we tried to experiment, a graphic novel — here, I have a copy. It's a real inquiry we did travelling from Liverpool to Copenhagen to Oslo. The idea is to find survivors of a shipwreck which took place in the Baltic Sea and make an inquiry to what happened. So the book is absolutely true — until what is not true. *(Laughter.)* Because of course it's a true inquiry on a subject, you never know what's true and what's not true, so I think it's very interesting.

DAK: *It's a combination, some of it's told in comic-book format with the text below it.*

MEZIERES: Yes. It's the testimonies. Every time we find a sailor and he tells us what happened, what he *knows* what happened, the story is told in pictures and captions. And the other drawings are illustrations of our travelling, **Christin** and I.

JULIA: *And there are some photographs.*

MEZIERES: And some photographs, yes.

DAK: *Was this through Dargaud?*

MEZIERES: No, it's another small publisher.

JULIA: *And was it successful?*

MEZIERES: I think the price has been really good but the sales are very bad. It's something very different, very new, even for Europe. And it's more expensive, and it's more —

DAK: *The production on it is excellent.*

JULIA: *Beautiful.*

MEZIERES: That's the deluxe edition.

DAK: *Besides VALERIAN and this do you have other projects?*

MEZIERES: I have very little production outside, a few short stories all by myself. Every time I am between two books I want to do something different, I want to try something — travelling I do very much. I need to refresh rather than to stay in front of my desk, that's why I can't have the production of a **Moebius** and a **Giraud** — left hand with **Moebius,** right hand with **Giraud.** *(Laughter.)*

And that's why I'm so much interested in those little projects and things like that. I have a feeling that I could be very creative and do something with other people, directing actors would really excite me very much. I myself don't feel like I want to be sitting in front of my desk over the next 20 years. *(Laughter.)*

DAK: *Earlier you mentioned people see the glamor of working in the art field but don't see the work, it's many many long hours sitting all alone in a room.*

MEZIERES: Yes yes yes yes.

JULIA: *It's like the movies they make about writers, it will be very romantic, the leaves bloom and fall, bloom and fall —*

DAK: *And pages of the calendar will spin.*

JULIA: *— But you don't get the sense of sitting for hours on end.*

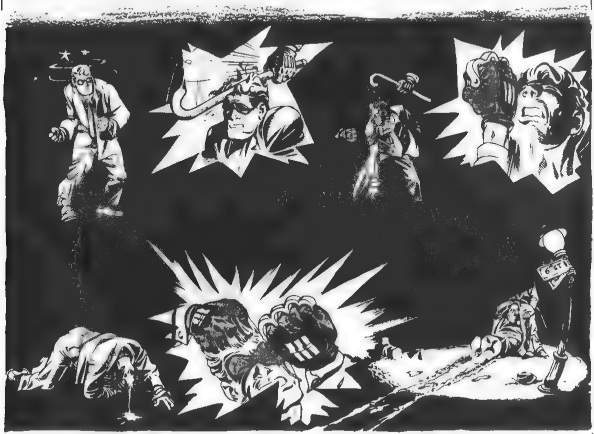
DAK: *And then the writer's very successful and travelling the world, it makes it look like a wonderful life.*

MEZIERES: Yes.

DAK: *And they leave the work out of it.*

JULIA: *The backache from leaning over the typewriter.* (Laughter.)

MEZIERES: But the market right now



© 1947-86 Will Eisner

Another one of Jean-Claude's early "influences"... Mr. Will Eisner (THE SPIRIT: "Klink Vs Octopus," Aug. 10, 1947).

"It's absolutely different from American science-fiction

— Jean-Claude by Forest —

in Europe is a little bit sad. I am afraid that I will have to produce more work, more books, if I want to make a living. Right now, after this experiment which took us a year to do, so it has been two years since I have had a new VALERIAN, and the market is slowing. Five years ago I could have expected to have many sales of books I have drawn ten or twenty years ago, it was no problem, but now if you don't have the new book — the market's changing. I know I will sell very well the next book — but it's difficult for me to work right now, waiting for an income of money next year. The sales are changing. *Still*, VALERIAN is selling very well. I can't cry. I am among the privileged and sitting very well. But it's different.

DAK: *In the United States syndicated comic strips have been treated differently from comic books, there's been a division, but in the comic-book field it used to be that the companies mostly owned the work and the artists benefited not at all. That has radically changed along with the market.*

MEZIERES: Yes. For us it's been always we own our originals and the royalties — and this I think can be always improved. *(Laughter.)* But the problem is that if you spend a year or more to make the book, which is *my* case, then *aaahhh!*

DAK: *Those royalties stretched over one year can become pretty small.*

MEZIERES: Really, and I don't produce a book each year. And the market does not allow you to experiment, you have to produce the same again and again and again for the freedom of creating something new. But our names are fairly well known and the people will follow us.

DAK: *That's also a big difference, everything is geared in the States to a high output on the part of the artists. It's starting to change now, the album approach is just starting in the States, but most people there would be amazed to find that European artists produce maybe a book a year or two, and the books are maybe 44 pages.*

MEZIERES: Yeah. Well, the one I'm working on is going to be 60 pages or more. But you see if you look at the page, not even to speak of the quality, but the amount of *work* in a frame is *more* than the explosion of the bomb above the city at night *(Laughter.)*

DAK: *And you can see why they do that, because they have to get to the next page; an artist will do beautiful work in the first four or five pages and then run out of time and* rush *through the rest of the book. That's a shame because you don't want the book to end poorly.*

MEZIERES: Yeah. Or also to *steal* the material from others is something you see — VALERIAN has paid a heavy tribute to that, but I find them! *(Laughter.)*

DAK: *Do you let that go unchallenged, do the publishers send them a letter to stop it?*

MEZIERES: Sometimes I yell. *(Searches room briefly, comes back with two books.)* I sent a photocopy of this page and my page here — this doesn't remind you of something! *(Laughter.)* It's *not* looking at the drawing and then doing something, I can show you which page has been stolen

comics, which personally I don't like very much."

— and *every* page is like that, it's so *stupid*, my God! But anyway, their story was in HEAVY METAL and I sent a photocopy of the pages, and HEAVY METAL *never* answered me about that, it was, "Oh, Mezieres, we like your work so well!" And I was very rushed, very late, so I said, "If you don't have any inspiration draw something about race cars!" *(Laughter.)* But with science fiction you create your own world, otherwise it is nothing.

DAK: *Yeah. Mark Propst doesn't like to draw anything that already exists in reality. He likes to make up everything, so he co-created X-THIEVES so he could make everything up in it.*

MEZIERES: Oh, exactly.

DAK: *But other people like to have something to look at, always.*

MEZIERES: Yeah, everybody gets inspiration from *something*, you know, but it depends what you *do* with it! *(Laughter.)*

DAK: *But that is definitely the case with American comics. I've seen — I won't mention the names, but I think everybody in America* knows *which artists do this — but you just look through some books and you know this was taken from Neal Adams, this from —*

MEZIERES: Yeah, I know, and I think that's really terrible. It's something that is not permitted in France. I mean if somebody does that the publishers — especially now, with the mood about comics — they would not *dare* publish that. And if you want to work on the high level of comics, you would not want people thinking you had done this. Of course if you work for food on anonymous work, well I don't blame you.

DAK: *Yeah. I think that began kind of like that, where you would work on a character owned by the company, if you swipe that character from before there's no problem, the company owns it, it's the same thing. That's not permissible when you're doing your own work.*

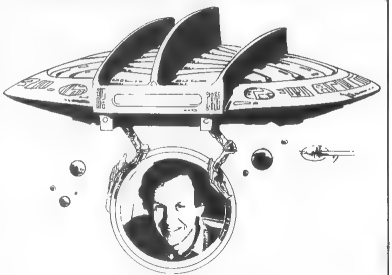
MEZIERES: No, no no.

DAK: *I thunk that that change in perception — do you see THE COMICS JOURNAL?*

MEZIERES: Well, I know of the magazine.

DAK: *COMICS JOURNAL has found artists who do that and they've printed the original page side by side with the swipe page, to sort of publicly hold them up to ridicule for that.*

MEZIERES: But that's bad also because *everybody* has found inspiration . . . it's something of not let's play the game of hunting for this and that, because you can find where someone has got their inspiration from, it is just that.



— Jean -Claude by Druillet —

JULIA: *And we see so many things every day and we don't really realize how much of our subconscious is absorbing it, and when we require an idea for something then something will pop in our minds —*

MEZIERES: Yes, that's why it's very touchy.

JULIA: *It's difficult to say that someone is directly copying someone, unless of course it's obviously not from the subconscious.*

DAK: *What you've shown us here is —*

JULIA: *That's too many light bulbs.* (Laughter.)

MEZIERES: Many many more.

DAK: *You mentioned Will Eisner before, and I've just wondered in Europe, in your*

— Jean-Claude by Margerin —

"I think that my work would not be appreciated in America."

generation, how was the work of Will Eisner and Jack Kirby and others looked upon?

MEZIERES: Will Eisner's work I discovered when I met the man, I didn't know his work at all. I sympathize with him very much, what he's doing.

You know, we had a law forbidding — a law put out by the Catholics and the Communists after the War — forbidding the importation of American comic strips in Europe, because of violence. That was a bad thing, but it was a good thing for Europe because many magazines were importing comic strips from America before, so they had to ask either local cartoonists to keep on doing in the style of the American comic strips, or to *produce* comic strips. And that's how Europe and Belgian and French comic strips got so strong. There was a tradition of comic strip and illustration and caricatures in the magazines, of course, so because of this *ban* on American comic strips *we*, people like **Herge** and all that generation of those people, had to produce, had to become strong. So for one time there was a *bad* law which did something *good! (Laughter.)*

DAK: *At some point they must have repealed the law.*

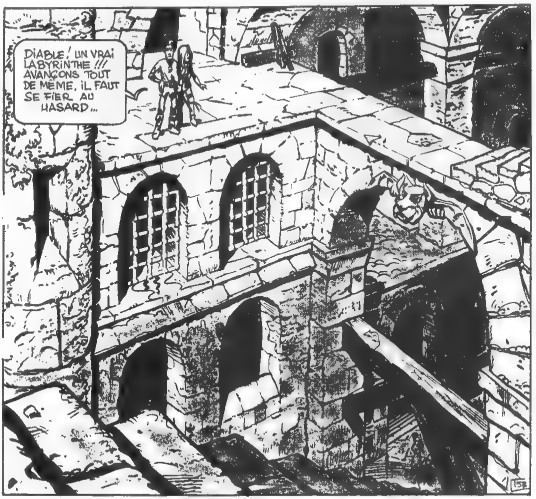
MEZIERES: Oh, yes, of course, and even MICKEY MOUSE was imported. *(Laughter.)*

DAK: *When you meet people from other countries, not necessarily the States, is there any interaction? I must say, being from America it's very hard to distinguish what is French and what is Belgian.*

MEZIERES: Yeah, the difference is very little because in fact Belgian or Swiss artists publish in the same magazines, and *some* of the Belgians publish in France. And to speak about Denmark, I was in Norway and in Holland lately, and in Denmark I have a very good friend who is very *famous* in all of the North countries because he's deals with the gods of Valhalla, you know, and he made a very successful album — his name is **Peter Madsen,** VALHALLA is the name of the series — and he just finished last year a full animation movie which is shown all over Europe, Northern Europe, and he told me that they hope to go to America to sell it to America; so there's production even in Norway.

It's *true* that the influence of French and Italian and Spanish is strong all over Europe, because they are countries that have many artists compared to smaller countries with very few — and sometimes it's because of religious pressure there are very few, but it's breaking slowly

DAK: *Is there much contact between the creative communities in these different*



Jean-Claude's VALERIAN, text by P. Christin (from Pilote magazine, 1967-68).

"I'm a movie director on my page, that's what I'm really interested in."

countries?

MEZIERES: Yes, yes, of course, but it's more a personal relation with who you like. I don't speak Spanish so I don't have any contact with the Spanish artists, but there's no barrier because it's more a question of whether you like or not the *work* of this fellow, and many Spanish or Italian artists work for the French magazines. France used to be the best place for selling your stuff. Not anymore, I don't know where *is* the best place! *(Laughter.)*

DAK: *Yeah, it's hard to say. There's been a recession or a crash in the comic-book market in the States, then it corrected itself at a lower level, so we thought we'd see how it is in Europe, and each country we've been in they say the comic-book market has gone down.*

MEZIERES: Yeah, yeah. You know, I'm *fascinated* with the money investment of the young people to equipment, the compact disks — people buy this equipment and they get ten records! *(Laughter.)* And probably they don't put as much money in books, and a collection of books ... Let's say ten years ago *any* publisher could expect to sell 5,000 copies of almost anything, even very poor quality books, and 5,000 copies is enough to at least publish something else so they publish lots and lots of things. Now, because you spend at least a year to make a book, every month when the travelling salesmen bring the catalogue of the new books there can't be a masterpiece *every* time, so they've been producing good and not so good products. And people are having less money to spend on comics, there's no doubt of that, and the posters sometimes cost a lot of money, and those gadgets *around* comic strips, using the success of TINTIN for example —

DAK: *Yeah, some of the TINTIN merchandise is extraordinarily expensive.*

MEZIERES: Yeah, it is *very* expensive — and if you spend $50 on the spaceship of TINTIN, you don't spend it on books!

JULIA: *Bruno at Album said that they sell so* many *of the TINTIN rockets, that every day they sell a few, and they're really big.*

DAK: *So you've seen the market here from before it was respected, and you've seen it grow —*

MEZIERES: It's funny because I *really* came as a teenager, I was already approaching comics, but *not* with the idea of ... I was not believing in myself, you know. Then when I came back to comic strips in '65 I was just like a surfer on the wave, just at the *right* time of the evolution and *fortunate* enough to stay with it.

DAK: *How do you think your work has evolved from the early, VALERIAN material to now? Because there's a span of a lot of years, do you look at the work differently?*

MEZIERES: Well, no, I don't look at it because I can't look at my own drawings. *(Laughter.)* Basically it's the same target, to tell a good story. Of course my drawing has evolved, it's less naive, but *sometimes* there were things that I did where I am more unhappy about my drawing now, but because I don't want to *redo* the same drawings I can't do the same. In the beginning I was a little bit naive but nobody cared, really, but now I know that I have a few thousand readers behind my *back* — I say a few thousand but it's more than that. But *still* it's the same thing. It's not art to me — art, I don't know what art is — I consider that it's good storytelling, and of course good art for good storytelling. That's our main goal, Christin and I, and we are pursuing it.

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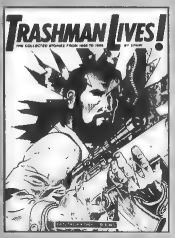

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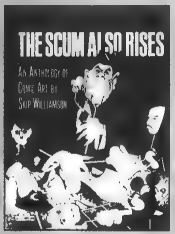

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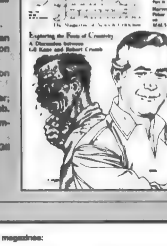

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"We figured we were making an episodic TV series that

YVONNE CRAIG

I TRIED JUDO -- THE GENTLE WAY -- BEFORE! NOW, I KNOW BETTER! JU-JITSU'S NASTIER...
NICE MOVE LADY! WE'LL FINISH UP JOB..
YEAH I ONLY WISH I WAS WEARING MY FOOTBALL SHOES!
BEFORE YOU DO HANK, YOU'LL HAVE TO BOOT ME!
.. BUT A LOT MORE EFFECTIVE!

Batgirl, from DETECTIVE COMICS #400, 1970. The art is by Gil Kane & Vince Colletta (story: Denny O'Neil).

In the 1960s, young girls had two role models on television. Marlo Thomas's THAT GIRL, an independent career woman who managed to maintain her identity in the man's working world, and Yvonne Craig's BATGIRL, an independent career woman who managed to maintain a double identity, and was able to do anything Batman did — in high heels! She was also TV's first super heroine, predating Lynda Carter's Wonder Woman by ten years.

On the set of her return to acting, a thriller called SAY BYE-BYE, Craig is revered. "Screen Scream Queen" Linnea Quigley raves, "I love Batgirl. I grew up watching her — she's cool!" Yvonne Craig takes a break from filming to talk about her bat-heritage.

PAT JANKIEWICZ: *Where have you been?*

YVONNE CRAIG: After I finished BATMAN, I did a lot of episodic TV, which is what I'd been doing prior to BATMAN, and I decided as parts were not coming as often as I wanted them to, I should find a more sensible way of making a living in the real estate business, which is *not* a more sensible way of making a living! *(Laughter.)*

My lack of roles had nothing to do with my role as Batgirl; there was no stigma to my having been Batgirl whatsoever. I like the real estate business; once you get your real estate license you don't want to give it up because you can buy and sell real estate anywhere in Southern California, which can come in handy!

PAT: *Does your celebrity status help, i.e., buying a house from Batgirl?*

YVONNE: I don't know — the other day somebody said to me, "We were considering three different brokers. Essen-

All artwork accompanying this interview is ©1989 DC Comics, Inc., unless otherwise noted.

would be over when it was over, and never rerun again."

After & before: our favorite female "BAT" person, Yvonne . . . 1989 & 1966.

tially, you all do the same thing, but I decided that this was a job for Batgirl!" *(Laughter.)* It turned out I had the listing six months and I never could sell it! I finally went to them and said, "I have done everything short of setting my hair on fire and running naked through the streets screaming 'Buy this property!'" As it turned out, hiring Batgirl for that particular property was not a good idea for them. *(Laughter.)*

PAT: *What surprises you the most about BATMAN?*

YVONNE: Essentially, what blows me away is that people are still watching it 20 years after it was done! I mean, we didn't think we were making GONE WITH THE WIND, we figured we were making an episodic TV series that would be over when it was over, and never rerun again, or rerun for only a brief period of time.

They were telling me the other day that apparently BATMAN never stopped being rerun somewhere in the world in the last 20 years — now, that's mind-boggling to me!

PAT: *Were Adam West (Batman) and Burt Ward (Robin) hard to get along with?*

YVONNE: Not for me, they weren't. I had heard some fairly lurid horror stories about both of them, but by the time I got on the set they were fine. Burt, particularly, was always on the set on time, knew his lines, did his job and when finished, went back to his dressing room and played chess with some pal, a stand-in.

THE EYE OF MONGOMBO

by Doug Gray

You're a FOOL, Jumballah!! You know it won't take me long to find an antidote!
Jumballah think of this! Try to prepare antidote without fingers!
CURSES!
You're still a fool, Jumballah! I can always get someone else to help me!!
Jumballah think of that, too!
whoops!
Well, you still have to catch me, Jumballah! I'm no sitting duck!!
AAAARGH!!
Always you make bad jokes rotten puns! Soon, you will no't make jokes! You will only make loud, parcing screams!
Say, you're outta my way, Monkey!!
Hey!!

an actual scene!

We asked Marcel Chevalier, the famous pantomime artist, to give his interpretation of the EYE OF MONGOMBO (translations provided by Mimes of America)

"thrilling, edge-of-your-seat excitement! Suspence and drama in the Hitchcock tradition!"

"Hilarous comedy... Sophisticated... would not be out of place on a shelf next to Oscar Wilde."

"terrific characters... continues the literary tradition of Ishmael, Huck Finn, and... Olaf"

"I think I'm stuck... I can't breathe... help! ...For God's sake, someone please help me!"

Doug Sez

In this adventure/comedy series, anthropology professor and globe-trotting adventurer Cliff Carlson is fired due to his villainous arch-rival Professor Nuskle, and then turned into a duck by an evil witch-doctor. He and his faithful assistants take off on a journey to find the Eye of Mongombo, when they run into two old enemies: Gruber and Kawliga!

FANTAGRAPHICS BOOKS

EYE OF MONGOMBO #1. 28 pages, black-and-white comic book. $2.00 ($2.50 in Canada)

"I love Vincent Price! He was my favorite villain."

BATGIRL HAS TRACED THE ABOVE-GROUND COURSE OF THE BAT-TUNNEL TO STATELY WAYNE MANOR...
BOB KANE
CAN MILLIONAIRE BRUCE WAYNE BE BATMAN?! SEEMS INCREDIBLE, YET--
WAYNE MANOR
-- BRUCE HAS A YOUNG WARD NAMED DICK GRAYSON WHO COULD VERY WELL BE ROBIN!
BUT BATMAN AND ROBIN ARE DEAD.. WHICH MEANS THAT BRUCE AND DICK WOULD BE DEAD, TOO, AND THERE'S CERTAINLY NO SIGN OF LIFE IN THE HOUSE!

From a short-lived BATGIRL newspaper strip, 8/24/67

I saw Burt and Adam the other day we're doing BATMAN wraparounds, and they're looking wonderfully fit. In retrospect, Burt had the hardest job of all of us, because he was the person who was not 15 years old trying to play a 15-year-old. That's difficult, because in repose, 15-year-olds are still moving, while in repose, anyone over 20 sits and kind of settles, so it's hard to keep up that 15-year-old energy when you're no longer 15.

PAT: *How were the other cast members?*

YVONNE: Alan Napier (Alfred) was a dream! Alan and I both had dogs. Alan's little dog was named Tippy and my dog was named Sebastian, an adorable Yorkshire terrier. My little yorky used to walk in every morning, lift his leg on the Batcave, and proceed to my dressing room --

PAT: *Your dog urinated on the Batcave?*

YVONNE: Yes! Every morning without fail. It was his job! *(Laughter.)* I said to Alan the first morning, "You don't think it's his critique of the show, do you?" because he was really upset. The strange thing is, because we had such a tight shooting schedule, a 3-day schedule, we really didn't have a lot of time to sit around the set and schmooze with one another, so I really didn't know that much about Alan until last year.

We had a BATMAN reunion and I got to listen to Alan being interviewed by the foreign press, and learned all sorts of wonderful things about him. I didn't know he started out with **John Gielgud** and **Laurence Olivier,** had done **Shakespeare,** or that his family was very discouraging to him because they felt he would never hold a sensible job as an actor, they didn't think he was very good and was too tall for the stage. I mean, his family made this known to him!

Until **Neil Hamilton** (Commissioner Gordon) died, which wasn't until after we finished shooting, obviously, I didn't know how old Neil had to have been while shooting that show! He was razor-sharp, always knew his dialogue, and was very spry. When I read his obituary, I realized he'd been in silent films. He'd been an early leading man, the hunk of his day.

PAT: *How did you get the part?*

YVONNE: I have no idea! The only thing that happened was **William Dozier,** BATMAN's producer, called me and said, "Would you come in for an interview?" When I got there, they said, "We're thinking of adding a character, Batgirl, into the BATMAN series. Would you be interested in doing it?" I said, "Very!"

At that time I was seeking a series because I had done a lot of episodic TV, but on that, as a guest star, nobody connects a name with a face; they just keep thinking, "Gee, that woman looks familiar. I wonder who that is. If you come into their homes on a daily basis they say "I know who that is!"

PAT: *Did you have a favorite villain?*

YVONNE: Everybody asks me this, and it has absolutely nothing to do with his villainy, it has to do with the fact that I'm madly in love with **Vincent Price!** He was my favorite villain — I just find him to be a fascinating man. I thought he was bright, witty, erudite and nice-looking. He's just wonderful

PAT: *What's your favorite episode?*

YVONNE: I guess the one where the Penguin wants to marry me because he figures it will give him respectability! ("Enter Batgirl, Exit Penguin.") It was the first show I did. I liked the concept that, if you married into the family you can do dastardly deeds and no one's going to call you on them. *(Laughter.)*

I did one show before that, a 15-

As our star appeared on STAR TREK's "Whom Gods Destroy."

©1993 Norway Production for Paramount Television

"I realize the producers hired me because I had

minute promo to introduce the character and see whether the network wanted Batgirl. In that pilot, she came in, helped Batman and Robin solve a crime, and one said, "Who is that masked girl?" The other one said, "I don't know — but I'd like to know her!"

After they did the promo, they changed the whole mask because these little points on the mask made it look like I'd been crying for weeks; they made tents in my face. We changed that and also opened up the eyes so I could see, because Adam could never see out of his mask, he couldn't look up or down and see anything.

PAT: *When did the Batgirl premiere air?*

YVONNE: No one ever saw it. Only ABC brass. They were introducing Batgirl as a character because their demographics led them to believe that they needed someone to encourage an over-40 male audience and a prepubescent female audience.

PAT: *Any episode you did not like?*

YVONNE: The one that I thought was kind of boring was the four-part story about Londinium ("The Londinium Larcenies"). We shot it with the wonderful **Glynis Johns** (Lady Peasoup) and crabby old **Rudy Vallee** (Lord Flogg). He was a curmudgeon! Because it was a long one to shoot — four parts — we had him hang around for a long time! Compared to such wonderful guests as **Vincent Price, Cliff Robertson** and **Milton Berle,** he was cranky!

PAT: *Do you like the character?*

YVONNE: I thought she was a fun character, then and now. When we did the 15-minute promo Batgirl pilot, she was a little more acerbic towards Batman, but as the show got going, you don't have time for that kind of nuance. The writer's doing three major characters, plus my father, my father's helper and the general villain of the show. That's a lot of people that you have to decide what to do with. You can't go in depth with any one character, so we lost some of that in the translation.

PAT: *How many of your own stunts did you do?*

YVONNE: I did all of them! Back when ice covered the Earth, I was trained as a ballet dancer, so I used to think the reason they hired me to do the BATMAN show was because of my ballet experience — they knew I could do choreography, which is what fight scenes are. They're all choreographed. That, and the fact that they knew I could ride my own motorcycle, so I could do all my motorcycle stunts on the Batcycle.

One day, years ago, my nephew was watching a BATMAN show, and I realized they probably hired me because I had a cartoon voice! *(Laughter.)* I heard this weird little voice and said, "Omigosh, that's why they hired me!" I said to my sister, "It's a cartoon voice." I don't have that same voice anymore, but *(squeaking)* it sounded just like this!

The motorcycle stunts weren't difficult, but the motorcycle was less than wonderful. They had taken the shocks off it to put Bat-wings on, so it had no shocks. When you went over a bump it was like jumping off a table stiff-legged. You'd really jar your teeth clear to the nubs. *(Laughter.)* It was also quite heavy. Adam complained that his didn't go fast enough, the Batcycle with the side car, so they gave me one so I wouldn't complain.

I had way more bike than I really needed. There was no need for a bike that heavy. If I got it slightly off-center, gravity would drop it and I'd have to pick it up again. It weighed about 350 pounds. I didn't have the upper-body strength to keep it upright, so I'd drop it and kick it. It did have an automatic starter. I said to them, "Please give me an automatic starter. I don't want to kickstart it and have it kick at me!"

PAT: *Why did Batgirl have a pet bird?*

YVONNE: That dreadful bird! *(Laughter.)* That bird was horrible! They decided they didn't want me looking like a lunatic, talking to myself to advance the plot, so rather than me walking around the room, "You know what I think — I think he probably stole such & such & did blahdy-blah," they said, "We'll give you a bird, that will be easy — you'll talk to the bird!" It was fine, except any time you would approach his rotten little cage, he would hop down on the bottom and skulk down so you'd be talking to an empty perch. It was stupid!

When you were out of the scene, he

Above/left: Neil Hamilton as Commissioner Gordon, and Stafford Repp as Chief O'Hara. Above/right: Burt Ward (Robin) & Adam West (Batman) = Grayson & Wayne.

©1967 ABC Inc. and Bat-Man Productions, Inc.

a cartoon voice! I don't have that anymore."

Yvonne (without her pet bird) avoiding Burgess Meredith (Penguin).

would make horrible squawking noises and ruin all the takes! Screaming and jumping when we don't need him. They should have stuffed a bird — I don't know why they didn't stuff him! *(Evil laughter.)* That parrot drove us mad. He was always looking for a way to get out. One day he flew out and he got way up in the rafters and catwalks and wouldn't come out. We couldn't shoot because we could get in the middle of a take and he'd swoop. S'funny, my stand-in took a liking to him, and took him home when the show was over. Later, I did a FANTASY ISLAND, and her husband was one of the grips. He said to me, "Do you know we still have Charlie the Parrot?"

PAT: *Did you ever meet Bob Kane, Batman's creator?*

YVONNE: I met **Bob Kane** only once, just briefly, and I don't recall we had much of a conversation, but he was disgruntled, I don't know whether rightly so or not, that he was not invited to do very much on the BATMAN show, as far as being a consultant or whatever. I understand he was hired as a consultant for the new movie, so I imagine he's probably happy.

PAT: *What's your opinion of the new movie?*

YVONNE: I haven't seen it yet, but I think it harkens back to what the Batman concept originally was. We were the aberration, we really were, because it was not the concept to be pop-art and campy, that was what was going on in the 1960s. We sort of set a standard for that. I have a feeling the movie is very much of the '80s, as we were of the '60s. As we were of our time, it will probably be of its time. It seems to be darker, but when people are bludgeoned just trying to jog in Central Park it's very timely.

PAT: *Speaking of dark, what did you think of the Barbara Gordon/Batgirl comic character being shot and crippled in THE KILLING JOKE?*

YVONNE: You mean what happened to my character? Yeah, somebody sent me that comic. Apparently, she was hit with a sniper's bullet in the spine. Sounds awful, but I figure it's their character to do with what they want, as long as they don't do it really to me! *(Laughter.)*

PAT: *Are you recognized a lot?*

YVONNE: Infrequently. When I came through London, from Africa, a young man at the immigration counter said, prior to my handing him my passport, "I know who you are!" So it's kinda fun.

When we were doing the series, I was in a supermarket and a little girl came up to me and said, "I know who you *really* are!" I thought "Good, she's gonna say **Yvonne Craig!**" So I said, "Really — Who?" She said, "Barbara Gordon!" *(Laughter.)*

People your age say to me, "Wow, you lived through the 1960s!" as though it were some miracle! In point of fact, if you were born when I was born, you would have lived through the '60s just as you lived through the '80s!

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"My original goal was to write BATMAN comics."

MICHAEL USLAN & BEN MELNICKER

When BATMAN hit the screens in 1989, becoming the movie of the year, it was more than a celebration of 50 years worth of character development, more than the return of the character to its original concept (in the sense that now, finally, the world at large will no longer think of Batman strictly in terms of the '60s TV show), and more than the merchandising bonanza of the decade. It was the culmination of ten years of hard work and dedication on the parts of Michael Uslan and Ben Melnicker. This is their *story . . .*

JACK C. HARRIS: *I'm talking with Michael Uslan and Ben Melnicker, executive producers of the BATMAN film, and SWAMP THING and other projects. I became aware of Mike when he was teaching a course on comics at Indiana University, the story about it was published in a Sunday supplement magazine, and then I later met Mike at a comics convention in New York City. Then I've also known Mike as a writer for DC Comics, as a lawyer for the film industry, and now as an independent producer. From my viewpoint it seems like when you started back in college you had all of this planned, and you went through this methodically, step by step. I want to know, really, if* that's *the way it happened.*

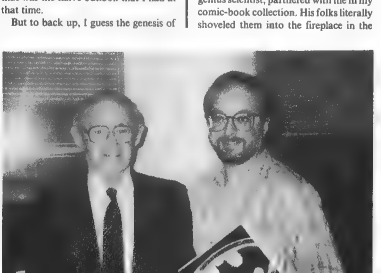
MICHAEL USLAN: Well, I've always been goal directed. My original goal was to write BATMAN comics. That's what I wanted out of life at one point in time; that, to me, would be a dream come true. Batman was always my favorite comic-book hero growing up. That finally happened around 1975. I got to write BATMAN. I then sat back in my apartment one night — this was while I was in law school — and said, "What next? What's the next dream I would like to see come true?"

JACK: *How did you get to write BATMAN?*

MIKE: There we have to back way up on the story. The next part of that dream was, "Gee, I would love to do the definitive 'creature of the night' version of the Batman." "The dark knight" wasn't a term that was popular at that time, it was "creature of the night" — which was he stalks criminals from the shadows, the vigilante as created by **Bob Kane** in 1939. I wanted to bring that to the screen and to do that in a way that would be *true to* the legend, and really make it real. From that moment on I was quite goal directed in those terms — that's where I wanted to go. If you had told me then it would happen fourteen years later I would have said you were crazy, you know. It couldn't be — either it would *never* happen or it would happen right away, that was the naive outlook that I had at that time.

But to back up, I guess the genesis of this *begins* growing up. My brother Paul, who is four years older than I am, used to just throw his comic books at me all of the time. "Read this. Here, look at this." *He* was a comic-book fan when he was young. According to my folks I learned to read when I was three by reading comic books. As a result, they never got into the '50s McCarthyism paranoia about comic books; they were never influenced by the Werthamites the way a lot of my *friends'* parents were. They saw it as a tool to read, to *spark* the imagination, and the only rule they had about comic books was I couldn't read them exclusively. As long as I read books and other things, comics were fine.

And they let me keep them, collect them. **Bobby Kline,** who is today a genius scientist, partnered with me in my comic-book collection. His folks literally shoveled them into the fireplace in the



Ben Melnicker and Michael Uslan discuss their success and future plans.

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"I began teaching a course on comic books, the first

early '60s. I have a distinct vision of his first 20 issues of FANTASTIC FOUR, AMAZING FANTASY #15, HULK #s 1-6, just going up in flames. Sometimes I wake up *screaming* in the middle of the night! *(Laughter.)* But those were the times, a lot of parents treated it that way.

So, I became an avid collector. I put them in plastic bags before they *made* tailor-made plastic bags for comics, and filed them in order, and we finally pushed my parents' car right out of the garage into the driveway. I amassed a collection which peaked at about 30,000 comic books dating back to 1936. There was a place in New Jersey called Collingwood Auction, about six or seven miles from my house, a flea market. This guy, I don't know where he got them, would come in with bundles and bundles of old comics, and he would sell them for a nickel apiece. Bobby and I had a deal with my folks, and every Friday night they would take us to Collingwood Auction after school, as soon as it opened, and that is how I amassed the bulk of my collection. For example, I bought for a nickel apiece the first 20 issues of MAD. I bought SUPERMAN issues numbered in the 40s and 50s. POLICE COMICS #1. CAPTAIN MARVEL. JR. #1. All of the 1950s Atlas comics.

In the past year I went back and that place is still there, run by the *son* of the man I used to buy comics from. I went to buy my son a copy of MOBY DICK, the CLASSICS ILLUSTRATED comic, and I took out my nickel and the guy said that he wanted $22.50. *(Laughter.)* Times have changed. But that's really where it all started, and I became an avid comic-book reader, avid comic-book collector.

When I got into college I wanted to channel the things that I loved in life into work, into *doing* something with them, which at that time was comic books and rock 'n' roll. I became a rock 'n' roll oldies deejay and began running trivia contests on the radio show — I was always a trivia buff — and I began teaching a course on comic books, the first accredited college course on comic books ever taught.

JACK: *This was at Indiana University.*

MIKE: This was Indiana in 1971. Immediately the media jumped all over it. There wasn't a class that went by where we didn't have reporters from all kinds of different magazines — we had everything from PLAYBOY to FAMILY WEEKLY, from CHILDREN'S DIGEST to MODERN MATURITY. And TV cameras as well. And as the *publicity* began to go out, I was invited to do radio and television talk shows — which I did, pushing the idea of comic books as a *legitimate* American artform, indigenous to America. I pushed comics as tools for education. I pushed comics as escapist entertainment for adults as well as kids. These were areas that really had not received very much publicity in the United States before, so it was causing a bit of a sensation.

Having been dragged by The Joker (Nicholson) to the lofty belltower, Vicki Vale

As a *result* of that course, it came to the attention of **Stan Lee** and of **Sol Harrison,** who at that time was a vice president at DC Comics. I needed lecturers for my course, and Stan sent **Gerry Conway** and **Steve Englehart,** and **Sol Harrison** sent **Denny O'Neil.** When **Denny O'Neil** came to stay that weekend, I was thrilled. Denny was my

accredited college course on comic books ever taught."

(Basinger) realizes what it is "to dance with the devil by pale moonlight."

favorite writer in comics. This was at the height of the relevance issues, GREEN LANTERN/GREEN ARROW, the whole social conscience awakening of the American superhero — which was very apropos to what was going on at college campuses at that time - so I was excited as can be.

When he showed up he said, "You know, I lectured somewhere down in Delaware or at some school in Pennsylvania, I can't remember exactly, and there's this guy you've *got* to meet. His name is **Jack Harris.**" *(Laughter.)* "And he's just going crazy about this comic-book course. I think he'd like to do something like that." I said, "Great, I'd love to talk to him." And that was our initial contact.

JACK: *That's right. I was teaching a course at the Philadelphia College of Art with three friends — we did it for two semesters — inspired directly by the article we'd read about you in the Sunday supplement magazine.*

MIKE: Now, here's the last piece of this story. That same week — I was getting *tons* of mail from all over — I get a letter from a guy who said, "I am *desperately* trying to set up a course like this at Hofstra University, could you help me get this thing going? I'd like to know what you're doing and how." That's how I came into contact with **Bob Rozakis.** And then, as the fates would work it, you and Bob and I, along with **Paul Levitz** and **Allan Asherman** and **Carl Gafford,** became the original woodchucks of DC Comics — which was to be, like, the next generation of DC Comics writers, editors, executives; they had this training program.

We all became lifelong friends as a result of that, and had a *terrific* time, learned the industry. And we each in our own way have been involved even to this day in the business. Paul, of course, went right up the ranks of DC, as did Bob in production. You were writing and editing, and I started writing, and then I got involved in the movie side.

JACK: *When you worked at DC, who did you work with directly and what kind of projects did you do besides writing BATMAN?*

MIKE: Well, my summers were spent at DC Comics. My first assignment, they gave me a big basket filled with letters — each of the woodchucks had to take their turn at doing this — and I wound up writing kids back from BATMAN. You know, signing letters "To Timmy, Best Bat-Wishes, Bruce Wayne." I finally came to the end of my ropes when I had to start answering mail for PREZ. *(Laughter.)* That was about it for me in terms of writing letters. But that was the way we all started over there. Then I became involved in three real interesting programs for them.

One was getting comic books into college bookstores, trying to work through the Indiana course and everything that was going on there to convince college bookstore managers that comic books could be taken seriously and that there was a growing college market for them. And we actually made some real good inroads into getting comic books distributed there. The second phase of the project was Edugraphics. Sol had started an educational comic-book

"The Comicmobile will go down in history."

Robert Wuhl as crime reporter Alexander Knox, and Pat Hingle as Police Commissioner Gordon.

series, working with some researchers at Harvard's Graduate School of Education, to use Superman and Batman and Wonder Woman to teach learning-disabled children and children for whom English was a second language how to read, to *motivate* them to read. These were oversized comic books with controlled vocabulary, and the program was eventually sold to the New York Board of Education. It was a *terrific* program, very very worthwhile and rewarding.

The third program was the Comicmobile. *(Laughter.)* The Comicmobile will go down in history as the great and noble experiment. DC rented a van and painted the whole thing with comic-book characters, it was this garish rolling comic-book factory. I went out followed closely by **Bob Rozakis** who took my place when I had to go back to school and sold comic books from the van, going up and down streets ringing the bell just like Good Humor sells ice cream. The greatest part of that experiment was the chance to meet kids directly and let them see your wares. They had a menu with all of the different titles, different covers, and we were really able to pinpoint what made certain titles sell and others not. It was *tremendous* direct market research. And that was a fun fun way to spend a summer, a very *unusual* way to spend a summer.

Then I went back to school and began writing for DC from Indiana. The first thing I did was THE SHADOW for Denny, a few issues of that. Then there were mystery stories, war stories, and finally BATMAN — which for me was the ultimate. I also had the opportunity to write THE QUESTION and work with **Alex Toth,** which was a *fabulous* experience, just a great experience. You see, there was a group of fans out of Indiana that were doing a fanzine called CPL and another one called THE CHARLTON BULLSEYE, and that was **Bob Layton** and **Roger Stern** and **John Byrne** and **Roger Slifer** . . . I'm forgetting everybody who was involved in that, but it was a lot of people who later went on and made their marks in comic books.

JACK: *So, how did you move on from that to the next step, which was working for United Artists?*

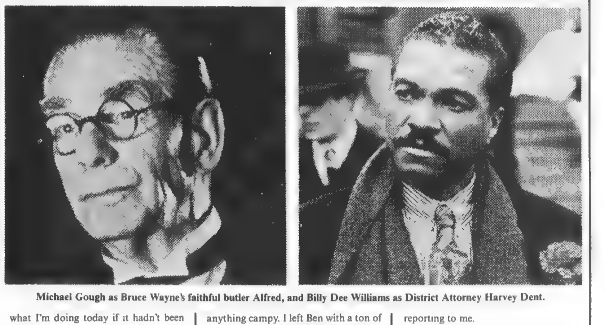
MIKE: When I graduated law school I went out looking for work, and realized that if I wanted to be in the movie or television business I had two options, New York or L.A. I preferred to be on the creative side, this was really what I wanted. But having no family in the business, *knowing* no one in the business, not having access to a huge sum of money or some hot property that everyone wanted to make into a movie, I quickly learned that doors were not open for me in the way that I wanted. I decided that maybe I could get started on the legal and business end and someday, when no one was looking, sneak in the back door and get onto the creative side. So, for me it was always a means to an end.

The job opportunity that came up was United Artists, which was the only studio then based in New York. I was told it was the best training in the business, that it was *more* than a legal job — you were in charge of all different aspects of business and financial and legal of different projects that were being developed if you went to work at United Artists, just a real broad range of experience. So I went to work at UA, I got to meet the people, I got to learn how films are financed, I got to understand how deals were made, and the various stages of production; and had the opportunity to work on a number of really interesting pictures, including the early ROCKY pictures, RAGING BULL, APOCALYPSE NOW, THE BLACK STALLION, and an interesting little **Roger Corman** film called PIRANHA.

When I first got it I figured, "Oh, some cheap JAWS rip-off." And then the people attached to it, **John Davison** as line producer who went on to become a top-notch producer in the business - **Joe Dante** the director, **John Sayles** the writer, **Jeff Sheckman** who was one of the producers who went on to become an executive in the business and **Paul Bartel.** It was really interesting, the group of people I met as a result of working on that particular project.

I worked early on SHEENA, QUEEN OF THE JUNGLE while it was still at UA. It had come over to UA in turnaround from Universal where it was a vehicle for **Raquel Welch** initially. Then at UA they talked about everyone who had ever been or ever would be a Charlie's Angel. *(Laughter.)* And finally it wound up over at Columbia. It was a great four years at UA; I learned an incredible amount and couldn't be doing

"I worked on SHEENA, QUEEN OF THE JUNGLE."



Michael Gough as Bruce Wayne's faithful butler Alfred, and Billy Dee Williams as District Attorney Harvey Dent.

what I'm doing today if it hadn't been for that.

One of the great breaks in my life came when I met *another* young lawyer working at UA by the name of **Charles Melnicker.** After I had been at UA for a few years and I knew I wanted to get out and produce, and I wanted to do this BATMAN movie that had been simmering for a lot of years, my initial reception from DC Comics was, "Yes, the rights are available; we trust you that you would turn this into a serious BATMAN, not do a rehash of the '60s thing; and we'd be willing to talk." And I knew I needed somebody who could really go in and not only negotiate out an agreement like that, but who had been through everything and knew how to mount a production.

So, I had been reading about **Ben Melnicker** in VARIETY - it seemed like *every* day he was on the front page at that time, setting motion picture history. He had been called in on a project called WINTER KILLS — Ben can speak more in detail about that. But I said, "How do I get to this guy?" I was talking to Charles and he said, "Well, why don't you go over and see my father?" *(Laughter.)* And I said, "Will he grant me an audience?" To me this was like going to meet *the Pope.*

Charles set it up, and I went over and met Ben over at the M-G-M Building, and presented him my whole idea on BATMAN — the whole history of the character, how I saw it, why it was *so* important to do it *seriously* as this "creature of the night" rather than anything campy. I left Ben with a ton of material, and a day or two later he called back. I went by on my lunch hour and he said that from a studio standpoint this was a presoid property, a property that generations have come into contact with, that due to its foreign sales it's known worldwide, the kind of thing that has not only great upside potential but as a result of this built-in audience had a limited downside. He said, "I would *love* to get involved with you in this, I think we can make it go." That began our association, which then resulted in a six-month negotiation with DC Comics, Warner Publishing — and on 3 October 1979 we formed Batfilm Productions, Inc. and signed the agreement with DC Comics optioning the rights to BATMAN. The following July I left UA officially and Ben and I began working together full-time.

JACK: *Let's switch over to Ben, and let me have a little bit of your background. I know you were with M-G-M for quite some time, but how did it all lead up to Batfilms from your side?*

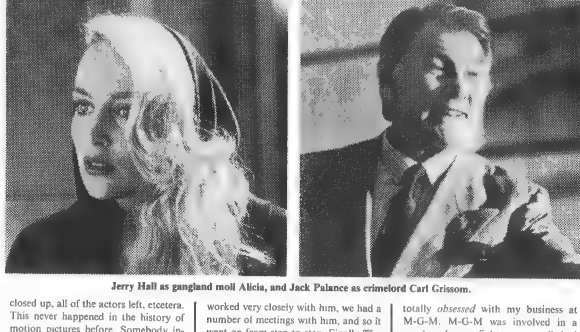
BEN MELNICKER: Well, I served with M-G-M for 30 years in various capacities. I started as a young lawyer and then became vice president and general counsellor, where all of the business affairs and legal reported to me. After that there were some corporate changes. **Edgar Broffman** and his interests came in and they thought they wanted their interests protected in a certain way and *insisted* that I become executive vice president, at which time all of the operating divisions of the company were reporting to me.

Shortly thereafter, **Kerkorian** made a tender offer for the company and took control, and decided (A) to move the company to the west coast, and (B) to stop making motion pictures except for one or two films a year. Neither of those two goals were attractive to me. I did not want to leave New York where I have been based for so many years; and there was no fun or desire for me to be part of a company that would be mainly dedicated to gambling, the building of gambling casinos. Shortly after that, in fact, M-G-M started the M-G-M Grand casino and the casino in Reno, Nevada. So I left in the early '70s.

I thereafter was involved in the production and financing, the *arrangement* for the financing, of several motion pictures. One was a picture called MITCHELL with **Joe Don Baker** and **Linda Evans** and others. Another was a picture called SHOOT with **Cliff Robertson** and **Ernie Borgnine** and others. And then I had what was then a very important project called WINTER KILLS which had a budget of about $6.5 million — which today would be probably $25 million — with a *host* of stars. Certain other producers *started* the picture and fell on their face because they ran out of financing, and the picture closed down. It was a *major* motion picture with **Elizabeth Taylor, Jeff Bridges, John Huston, Tony Perkins,** a host of others, and they ran out of money!

The picture had a twelve-week schedule and at the end of eleven weeks it

"The major studios were not interested in BATMAN."



Jerry Hall as gangland moll Alicia, and Jack Palance as crimelord Carl Grissom.

closed up, all of the actors left, etcetera. This never happened in the history of motion pictures before. Somebody involved came to me and asked what I could do. Well, to make a long story short, for the first time in the history of the motion picture business, and never since, a single picture was put in chapter eleven in order to keep all of the creditors at bay. I then arranged a rather complicated plan which involved the IRS and the California Tax Commission and about 400 creditors, including AFL because they have all of the trade unions out there, the guilds, etcetera. We put the picture together and it was finished, that took up some time.

It was at or about the end of that project that *this* came up, this BATMAN project came up, and it became a long labor of love. After we signed the rights agreement, the major studios were not interested in doing it. They did not have the *vision* to see that this could be a major motion picture! They thought it would be a replica or just another version of the TV shows, which did not appeal to them as a major motion picture. I talked to Michael and I told him that I knew **Peter Guber,** having dealt with him when I was at M-G-M, and I thought that he would fit into it. Michael agreed with that wholeheartedly. I then called Peter, arranged a date, and Michael and I flew out to the coast, and within three days we concluded the agreement with him.

Shortly thereafter **Tom Mankiewicz** was engaged as scriptwriter on a very large deal, and it took him about a year, if not longer, to do the script. Michael worked very closely with him, we had a number of meetings with him, and so it went on from step to step. Finally **Tim Burton** came into the picture about 1985 or 1986 and things got in hand quickly and it moved, and the picture started shooting in 1988.

MIKE: 10 October 1988 Just to back up for a couple of minutes, Ben doesn't like to talk about himself. *(Laughter.)* But I just wanted to mention a few things. Not only was he an executive vice president of M-G-M, he was the chairman of their film selection committee at a time when M-G-M was on top of the world, a member of the board, their representative to the MPAA, the Motion Picture Association of America. He negotiated the landmark Paramount consent decree which required companies to divest themselves of their theaters; one of the great antitrust suits of all time, he was actually negotiating with the Attorney General.

He is a legend in the business. That whole aura, the whole legend of **Ben Melnicker,** was really what drove me to try to meet him; and to try to get his interest in this project, to get things rolling. I knew if I could get somebody of *that* calibre interested that no matter what would happen this BATMAN picture would come to pass. And I was absolutely right about that.

JACK: *Let me ask you something about that. Before Michael walked in with his armload of material, what was your familiarity with the character of Batman?*

BEN: I must admit, very slight. During that entire period of the '60s I was just totally *obsessed* with my business at M-G-M. M-G-M was involved in a number of proxy fights, so we really had two very important things going on at M-G-M. One was running the business, and that was more than enough for one job, for one person to handle. And in *addition* to that, because we had such a rich library, because we were the Tiffany of the business, many people tried to come in and take us over. We had talks with CBS with respect to a merger. We had talks with ABC. We even had talks with Union Pacific

They were just beating down our door. We finally made certain arrangements and people came on our board, and they were like moles in there trying to take over. The position of vice president and general counsel puts one in the spot of supervising the outside legal, the outside publicity, the outside public relation forces, in a situation like that. And much time was spent in Washington and so forth, it was an all-absorbing thing.

MIKE: Talk about the challenge you had on getting DOCTOR ZHIVAGO

BEN: Of course, every important project raised its own *unique* problems. When it came to buying the rights for DOCTOR ZHIVAGO, they were held by **Feltroneli,** the Italian publisher, who acquired them from **Pasternak.** That contract was accomplished before we stepped into the picture. **Carlo Ponti** came into our office and the president and I sat with him, and he said he had gotten the interest of **Robert Bolt** and **David Lean** in DOCTOR ZHIVAGO. And, of course, we felt that with **David Lean's** record, never

"BATMAN II is in the planning stages."

having made a picture that did not make money, and with **Robert Bolt**, probably *the* outstanding English writer of the time, that it was a very desirable project.

On the other hand, on our board of directors, which had to approve this deal, there were some very important persons, including **Bennett Cerf**. **Bennett Cerf** was very influential, and he said he was very much opposed to the deal. He said, "People are going to think DOCTOR ZHIVAGO is a *medical* book. How are you going to dissuade them?" Of course we explained to him, "My God, with all of the publicity about it having won the prizes that it did and so forth, the people *know!*" Word of mouth is incredible in this business.

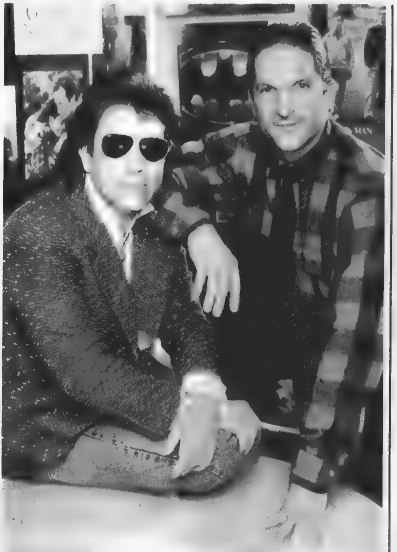
In *addition* to all of that, there was a provision in the contract that said the picture had to carry out the spirit of the book. That gave **Bennett Cerf** and others an easy handle to say, "What a *risk* M-G-M would be taking!" If we made the picture and then later on we had a lawsuit or an injunction from the rights owner, from the Feltroneli Publishing Company, we'd run a heavy risk. The budget of the picture was $12 million at the time — it would be probably $40 million to $50 million in today's dollars.

I made a suggestion to our management that we should take the leading English scholar at Oxford, the leading Russian scholar at Oxford, and the same two kinds of scholars at Cambridge, and have them analyze and read the book, have them analyze and read the screenplay. If they would give us affidavits that the screenplay carried out the spirit of the book, that it *did* carry out the spirit of the book, I could not conceive of any court ever saying that we didn't do what we were supposed to do. And these people, except for getting an honorarium — I think we paid each of them $200 just as a way of having consideration, a nominal honorarium — they were totally dispassionate about it. What greater care could one take! I went over there with one of my assistants, to Oxford, to Cambridge, met the people, did all of that, and we got approvals on everything.

And I also added, to the board, **"David Lean** is the preeminent director in the business. If we took the screenplay — which would get the stamp of approval from these four scholars — and put it in the hands of **David Lean,** we just would not have anything to worry about." And nothing could have gone more smoothly than that whole operation. The picture was done. And in 1968

BATMAN director Tim Burton on the Warner Brothers set of the same name.

"If we only deal with the Joker, Penguin, Catwoman,



Producers of the BATMAN movie, Jon Peters and Peter Guber.

— the picture came out in the early '60s — by 1968 **Carlo Ponti** had $17 million in his pocket, **David Lean** had $17 million in his pocket, and M-G-M had $34 million in its coffers, as pure *profit*. Besides the money M-G-M made, DOCTOR ZHIVAGO now is one of the great classics in the motion picture industry.

JACK: *Did that become a standard practice in contracts?*

BEN: About spirit?

JACK: *Yeah.*

BEN: Absolutely not. That was because that book was *unique*. It was, as you remember — maybe you don't remember, you may be too young — it was a celebrated book. **Pasternak** won a world renowned prize with the book — I forget, was it Pulitzer or Nobel? And then there was the whole question of whether he was in jail or whether he was alive or not alive. He sold it to **Feltronell**, but **Feltronell**, it turned out, the leading publisher in Italy, was a communist. But everything was special about it; it was a *unique* situation.

JACK: *Now, let me ask you . . . We're mainly concerned about the BATMAN projects, but of course this is not your only area of interest. We're familiar with the two SWAMP THING films and various other projects, and I would like to hear about some of the other ones besides BATMAN. The first SWAMP THING film came out before BATMAN . . . the second one came out before BATMAN, too, didn't it?*

MIKE: Yeah, before BATMAN.

JACK: *So, your original association was due to BATMAN, but how did some of these other projects come about?*

MIKE: We knew BATMAN would take a little while. *(Laughter.)*

BEN: Incidentally — let me interrupt — I happen to be working on a deal here, this is a Warner *book* deal that will eventuate in a picture. I'm not giving you the subject matter. *(Reads.)* Warner and the proprietor — Batfilms Productions is the proprietor — agree that the book, the contents thereof, and the terms of this agreement shall remain confidential until such time as it is mutually agreed to release notice for the book. It is further agreed that all publicity and interviews, and any material contained in the book, shall be coordinated through Warner.

Now, *most* often — for instance, we have a deal with the Disney Channel that says the same thing — we have a deal with the USA Network that says the same thing. I'm very concerned about Disney because we got a notice from them. Now, we could make an argument here, get into a legal argument, that in talking to you — of course, if we tell you about this book then we're violating this — but I didn't say what it is. I'm pointing out that this contract stipulates that you cannot even *talk* about certain projects at a certain point in time unless everyone agrees on it.

MIKE: Yeah, but he can be as ambiguous and as vague as he wants right now, he's not violating the contract.

BEN: I'm not saying what the content is. But there are *certain* things we can talk about. Let's say we have now in active development . . . how many projects?

MIKE: Twenty.

BEN: Twenty projects in active development.

JACK: *Which ones can you mention? And specifically, what can you tell us about the next BATMAN film?*

MIKE: BATMAN II is in the planning stages, and there will be BATMAN films to come. One of the *great* things that we have going for us in terms of future BATMAN movies is the meat and potatoes of an ongoing series that would continue to be unique and strong and not simply a rehashed formula — is the villains.

BEN: And by series you mean pictures.

MIKE: Sequels. Batman has the best super-villains in history, that's one of the reasons he's been around *so* successfully for 50 years. If we only deal with the

Two-Face, you've got enough for half-a-dozen movies."

HE'LL ROAST IN HELL FIRST!
THE QUESTION!! GET 'IM--
GAMA! HE AIN'T GOT NO FACE!!
NOT UNTIL THE COURTS CLOSE THE LOOPHOLES IN PROSECUTION AND PLEA-BARGAINING LAWS, WILL AMERICANS BE SAFE FROM PUNKS LIKE YOU -- !!

THE QUESTION . . . created by Steve Ditko, plot by Roger Stern, written by Michael Uslan, art by Alex Toth [from CHARLTON BULLSEYE #5].

first-stringers, the Joker, the Penguin, the Catwoman, Two-Face, the Riddler, you've got enough there for half a dozen movies — *just* with the first-stringers.

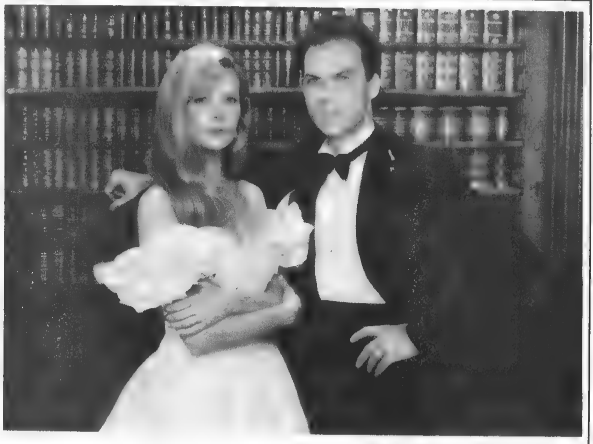
And if you begin to look beyond that, to some *wonderful* villains like Ra's Al Ghul, the Scarecrow, Man-Bat, there's just so much great and different material there. It's wonderful. Robin has yet to be dealt with. We have plenty to do in the future in BATMAN, and we look forward to it with great excitement. We believe that the world is hooked, the world will tune in and follow the adventures of **Bob Kane's** original Batman. I like that a lot.

In terms of projects beyond that — *(Sirens blare from streets outside.)* — we now are working on a theatrical feature called KIDD. It's based on **Tom Selitsos's** novel about the search for **Captain Kidd's** buried treasure in modern day New York City. It is New York City at its darkest and most menacing. It's an urban version of RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK, once you get into the actual search for the treasure. We're very excited about that project. *(Sirens fade.)*

JACK: *How did you organize those sirens when you started talking about that?*

MIKE: We have many special effects at our fingertips. *(Laughter.)* Our biggest project in the immediate future is MONOPOLY: THE MOVIE. Ben and I bought the rights from Parker Brothers to the board game, for motion pictures, and are working on a *very* unique story. The first thing people ask us is, "What the *hell* are you going to do with *that?*" Their expectation level is wide open, they just have no concept. The follow-up question is, "Is it going to be anything like the movie CLUE?" We're very lucky to be in a position with MONOPOLY where we are beginning with virtually no restrictions. We have the ability to come

"We have in the works SWAMP THING."



Kim Basinger [Vicki Vale] and Michael Keaton [Bruce Wayne, Batman].

up with our own story and our own characters, whereas CLUE was limited to six characters in six rooms in one house. So, we're real excited about it, and expect to shoot in Atlantic City where all of the properties on the board game come from.

JACK: *I'd like to be an extra.*

MIKE: Would you like to be the boot or the iron? *(Laughter.)*

JACK: *No, I want to be the lead pipe.* (Laughter.)

MIKE: We are working on a feature film tentatively called GANGBUSTERS, which is a gangster picture that we would like to see done as a gritty 1930s Warner Bros. gangster picture. It's written by **Joe Gores,** who is one of the top mystery/detective novelists in the country — and wrote HAMMETT and some other films. We're excited about that project. We're working on a new SGT. PRESTON OF THE YUKON television series, which is moving forward right now — a modernized version of SGT. PRESTON.

We have in the works a SWAMP THING series — *two* SWAMP THING series, actually, that will run simultaneously with each other; a Saturday morning cartoon series and a live-action series. The live-action one would be approached in a much more serious tone than the movies have been, while the animated would cater more directly to the kids. We are doing a movie of the week for the USA Network, with **Heather Locklear,** about **Edgar Allan Poe,** called THE TELL-TALE HOUSE.

And we have a number of other projects in the works. Generally, we have four comics related projects that I can't quite talk about yet, one of which is a very famous old pulp hero, and three of which are famous ongoing comic-book characters. That really sums up what we're working on.

BEN: There's FANTASTIC VOYAGE II.

MIKE: FANTASTIC VOYAGE II is an incredible deal based on the book by **Isaac Asimov,** which Ben put together.

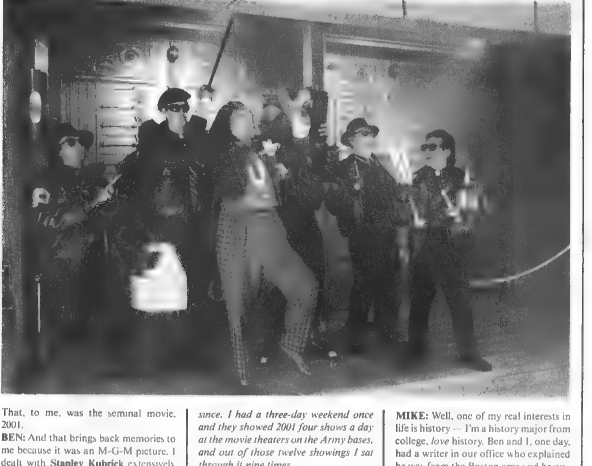
BEN: That was a deal made with Doubleday with a very sizeable advance. **Isaac Asimov** was so eager to do that that we made an arrangement whereby he would get his share of the publishing rights but we end up owning all of the rights other than the publishing rights. So we are totally free to do anything in the way of motion pictures, television, etcetera. And we are now in the process of negotiating a motion picture project based on the book.

This book is *not* a sequel to the Fox picture, it's totally new characters and a totally different story. But it *does* have the miniaturization at the core of it. And we contemplate that there will be a series of books, and a series of motion picture and/or television projects emanating from each of the books. We think — again, relying on presold properties — we think FANTASTIC VOYAGE has a tremendous recognizable value out in the marketplace.

JACK: *FANTASTIC VOYAGE, the original movie, it was sort of the first of the more sophisticated science-fiction things that led to the public's acceptance of such things as 2001. Science fiction seems to have grown up starting with that movie.*

MIKE: I think that might have been a first step, and I think 2001 was the zenith that broke it all wide open, absolutely.

"I dealt with Stanley Kubrick. He is a bit of a genius."



That, to me, was the seminal movie. 2001.

BEN: And that brings back memories to me because it was an M-G-M picture. I dealt with **Stanley Kubrick** extensively on that picture. He is a bit of a genius but not the easiest person in the world to work with. It's not because of his personality, it's because of his total artistry and dedication, which I suppose is a concomitant of that, being difficult to get along with. But it was a great *experience*. And ever there was a *prestige* picture and a *successful* picture rolled into one, that is it. We did a picture like DIRTY DOZEN more or less about that time that was highly successful, but I wouldn't call it exactly a prestige picture

But I'm not in any way saying I wouldn't like to have a *score* of DIRTY DOZEN pictures.

JACK: *2001 came out right when I went into the Army.*

BEN: Where were you in the Army at that time?

JACK: *I was in Germany, spent two years in Germany. It was during the Vietnam War, but I was with the NATO forces in Germany.*

BEN: Did you learn German?

JACK: *I could read the signs and the menus.* (Laughter.) *And I've forgotten it since. I had a three-day weekend once and they showed 2001 four shows a day at the movie theaters on the Army bases, and out of those twelve showings I sat through it nine times.*

BEN: Was that picture popular among soldiers?

JACK: *Oh, yeah, lines around the theater*

MIKE: I was in high school and the thing to do was go see 2001.

BEN: At the beginning it wasn't that highly successful; it took a *long* time for word of mouth to build up.

JACK: *I was thrilled by it. At the same time — talking about the science-fiction films getting a momentum at that point — PLANET OF THE APES came out in the late '60s, too. I always lump those three together, PLANET OF THE APES and FANTASTIC VOYAGE and 2001, as being* intelligently *produced and well written science-fiction films.*

MIKE: Kim Hunter was in PLANET OF THE APES and we had the pleasure of working with Kim on THREE SOVEREIGNS FOR SARAH. I just couldn't quite identify her. *(Laughter.)*

JACK: *Talk a little bit about THREE SOVEREIGNS FOR SARAH, because I don't think a lot of people are familiar with it.*

MIKE: Well, one of my real interests in life is history — I'm a history major from college, *love* history. Ben and I, one day, had a writer in our office who explained he was from the Boston area and he was working on, had been spending two years researching, the Salem witch trials of 1692, working with the two primary historical experts on the subject. And they had uncovered the original trial transcripts and the depositions sitting in the basement of a museum up in the Salem area.

He was just absolutely enthralled by the *true* story of the witch trials, what *really* happened there, which they had been able to piece together. And he wanted to know if we would be interested in getting involved in helping get it set up, financed — and we basically said we needed a script to do it, but if he was willing to speculate and write the script then we would speculate with our time to get it set up. Three months later he came walking into our offices with the best script I had ever read *completely* historically accurate.

We then set about on an eighteen-month task to raise the money for this and to get it set up; ultimately, getting it set as a mini-series for PBS on THE AMERICAN PLAYHOUSE series.

"Out of 107 reviews from all around the

which is very prestigious; and then getting a matching grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and finally bringing in Goldcrest Films to distribute it foreign. We then produced this mini-series with **Vanessa Redgrave, Patrick McGoohan, Kim Hunter, Phyllis Thaxter,** an absolutely all-star cast.

BEN: It took some very ingenious type of approach to the business, to the financing, because we had a limited budget with PBS there. The picture — three hours, right.

MIKE: Three hours.

BEN: The picture looks as if it cost five million.

MIKE: Seven, eight.

BEN: And yet it was done on a budget of $1.5 million. There were, really, principally three reasons for it. First, it was done as an independent. Doing it as an independent feature you don't do it with the splash and waste, if you will, that some of the studios do.

But more importantly, we got all of the actors to work for scale because of the historical importance of this piece. In other words, somebody that may be getting $200,000 normally would be getting maybe five percent of that, because they're working on scale. Now, **Vanessa Redgrave,** you just can't say to her, "Work for scale." And yet we had to work around that so we were truthful to everybody, that everybody *including* Vanessa worked on scale — but there was a way to give her certain *other* considerations that did not cut across that representation to the other people. But unless all of the actors worked on it for scale, this thing could not have been done.

And the third reason it was done is that we were very fortunate in being able to get all of those historically accurate costumes and sets, locations, free of charge. We didn't have to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars in advance and keep a crew on while all that was going on. Those are the three main reasons we were able to do it.

MIKE: Museums, historical societies, the citizenry, were so *thrilled* to have somebody coming in and doing the *true* story of the Salem witch trials, rather than some *horror* movie, that they went all out to support us. And the series has absolutely been heralded. Out of 107 reviews that came in from all around the country, we got 105 raves — which isn't bad. It really for the first time explained what the witch trials were all about, and why. And it's an important lesson. People should know so history doesn't repeat itself over and over again, which it constantly seems to do. So, we were really really pleased with that.

Plus, it gave me the chance to meet **Patrick McGoohan.** *(Laughter.)* I am a PRISONER fan to the nth degree. The first day Patrick was on the set I went up to him and said, "Are you free for dinner?" He said sure. I said, "I'm taking you to the best place in Salem, but in exchange you're going to sit there with me for a couple of hours and I'm going to tell you what I think THE PRISONER was all about." *(Laughter.)* "The whole thing, man, and you're going to tell me if I'm right or wrong." He said, "It's a deal."

We went out for dinner, and I was *so* excited to be sitting there with him, and I said, "First of all, he *was* John Drake Just like it says in the theme song, they gave him a number and took away his name — that's it, he went and became Number Six. That's just for starters, I'm sure about that much." He said, "I don't think so." *(Laughter.)* He said, "First of all, that *horrible* theme song was not part of the original British series, they did that when it came over to America. And I never thought of Number Six as having been a secret agent, I always thought of him as being a scientist." And I said, "Whoa!" *(Laughter.)* That just destroyed every domino that I had going from the beginning to the end — and it was just a wonderful wonderful evening.

JACK: *Now, I see — especially today in the comics industry — that a lot of times the spirit is* lost, *and altered for all time sometimes.*

MIKE: It often depends on the approach you're taking. We would agree in any kind of thing not to denigrate or disparage a character. But there are some points . . . let's take, for example, SWAMP THING II, which was consciously made to appeal to a market that had surfaced and been targeted from the results of the first SWAMP THING and other things that had been done. And that was kids. Kids loved the first SWAMP THING. Kids *loved* it! And we made a movie targeted for kids. The comic book, obviously, is now targeted exclusively for *adults.* We could not do *that* interpretation of the character to

The teaming of Jack C. Harris, our interviewer, and Gray Morrow, from NATIONAL LAMPOON.

©1985 Jack C. Harris/Gray Morrow

country, we got 105 raves — which isn't bad."

This was the masthead for an article Mike wrote for DC's old AMAZING WORLD OF DC COMICS, circa 1975.

CHUCKIN' IT

reach *our* audience. We needed to do this funny fairy tale kind of approach which was more akin to a traditional beauty and the beast kind of thing, rather than the psychological horror and, as DC called it, sophisticated suspense, in SWAMP THING II.

So, sometimes it depends upon what audience you're trying to reach. On the other hand, with BATMAN going for the *broadest* audience, going for an adult audience, you can not only adhere to the concept of Batman as the "creature of the night" but go as far in *that* range as you want to go, and ignore some of the things which had been done in the intervening years which took away from that, which diluted the character. You really have two different ends of the spectrum depending upon the audience that you want to reach.

We have a project coming up, FISH POLICE, which is an animated series that we want to work like a ROCKY AND BULLWINKLE cartoon. We want the kids to really enjoy it, because it is *bizarre*, it is *unique;* but we want the parents to really enjoy it as well for things that are presented there. And we now have an arrangement with **Gary Wolfe,** who created ROGER RABBIT. Gary, who was able to create this believable alternate universe known as Toontown, is now doing that with our Fishworld, and the results are just terrific. So that's a project we're really excited about that we hope will reach a broader audience.

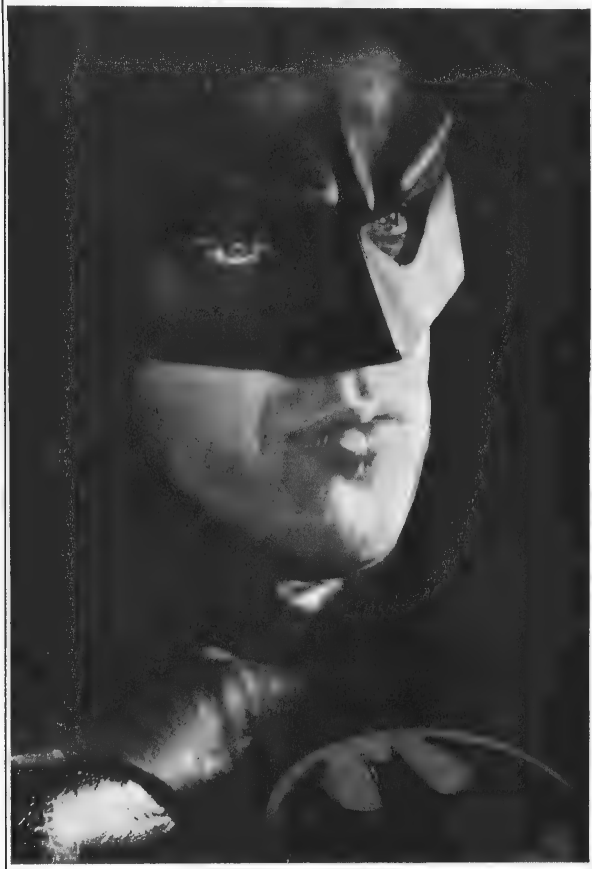
We did an animated TV series, DINOSAUCERS, which is now out in 65 half-hours and runs Monday through Friday mornings on the Family channel. With DINOSAUCERS, too, while it's *basically* for kids, we wanted to make it painless for adults to sit and watch with their kids. So we've done a lot of movie parodies, for example. We did "The Maltese Pterodactyl" and "Aloe and Costego Meet the Abominable Snowman" and "We're Off to See the Lizard." *(Laughter.)* There were a lot of things that we did -- thanks largely to our story editor **Diane Duane,** who I think is the leading fantasy novelist right now — for adults. So, my point is just that you can

interpret comics many different ways depending on your audience.

JACK: *You started out talking about being goal directed. What's your next goal?*

MIKE: The next goal is to have a lot of fun in what we do. I don't think that you need to go out and top yourself, that we need to worry about how we're going to top BATMAN, or being afraid of doing anything because it might not top it. That's not a factor. For us it's what's going to be fun, what we're going to enjoy doing, what projects we have a passion for and truly would love to do, and what people we want to work with. I think those factors will make for an exciting second decade for Batfilms, which begins 3 October 1989. *(Laughter.)*

We think that the future looks just terrific. We have some more projects dealing with subject matters that we love; including, for me, comic books, rock 'n' roll, history, and some other things that are *completely* off the wall, and some other things that are quite serious. There are some true stories that we think have, really, award winning potential.



BATMAN II: THE SEQUEL

The following portion of the interview was conducted by telephone on December 5, immediately before we went to press. Rumors to the contrary notwithstanding, this constitutes the very latest information on the sequel to BATMAN . . .

JACK C. HARRIS: *Why did Warners release the video so soon — rather than wait and release it next summer or winter to keep Batmania from fading?*

MICHAEL USLAN: Look at the sales figures for the video. I rest my case.

JACK: *Will you and Ben Melnicker be executive producers of the sequels?*

MIKE: We will be "Executive Producers" on all sequels.

JACK: *What, exactly, does an executive producer do — and, in particular, what did you do on BATMAN? Also, Ben Melnicker mentioned Tom Mankiewicz as part of the original, expensive, development deal. Yet the project evolved and other screenwriters picked up the baton . . .*

Who finally arbitrates the decision to go ahead with a treatment or script . . . or seek another version?

MIKE: Executive Producer is a very fluid title, as are all "producer" titles. From picture to picture, the responsibilities change. In the case of BATMAN, I came up with the idea to make a serious BATMAN movie, one that would capture the Dark Knight stalking criminals. This was one of the reasons DC Comics felt very comfortable back on October 3, 1979, when we formed Batfilms, Inc. and optioned the property. I vowed then not to let the property out of my hands and not to let anyone in on the project who did not go along with that concept of the film.

In partnership with **Ben Melnicker,** we began a six-month-plus negotiation. We had to raise the money to option the property and once we accomplished that we were promptly turned down by every studio. They would say things like, "Whoever heard of a *serious* BATMAN?" They kept telling us that the world would only embrace the funny, potbellied BATMAN with the POWS, BAMS and BIFFS. We said no way. That BATMAN was great for the '60s (and it was), but we wanted, for the '80s, something new, something for adults *and* kids worldwide. This was the basis on which we worked. We felt it was the way to go.

Ben knew **Peter Guber** from his days at MGM. Peter was head of Casablanca Records and Filmworks. At the time they were primarily records, but they had begun some film work and were well-funded. We flew out to see Peter and spent three days selling him our concept for the character. At the end, he said "You're right and they're wrong. Casablanca will bankroll the BATMAN development."

Jon Peters came in a couple of years later as Peter's partner. The following February, **Tom Mankiewicz** was engaged as the first screenwriter. It was this early successful development that eventually led to Warner Brothers backing us. Since they put up the money, it's Warner Brothers, with the input of those concerned — the director, the producer — who make the final decision to go ahead with a script treatment or look for an alternate version.

The Line Producer is the one on the set every day who gets the crew up at 5 a.m. On BATMAN it was **Chris Kenny.** He had been co-producer on EMPIRE OF THE SUN for **Spielberg,** then he came over and worked for us.

JACK: *Did you have a specific idea of what you wanted to see in the script? Any creative input or direction from you, at script stage or later?*

MIKE: Absolutely. It came from all of us. We all had input; we all had our comments and on-going discussions about that.

JACK: *Do you now find the financial people and studios taking the idea of superheroes more seriously?*

MIKE: When we started, we were told

everything from "Hit the road" to "You're crazy." But here we had a non-superpowered human being who would bleed if shot; someone with his whole origin based on being driven and nearly psychotic. This was the one property, above all, that *could* be, and *deserved* to be done seriously. What turned everyone around was the first screenplay. They began to say "Wow, this *could* work," particularly when **Tim Burton** came into the picture and showed how he could execute the visions of the script. That was the turning point.

JACK: *Do you think there'll be a spate of imitations — that BATMAN will spawn a rash of rip-offs and also-rans as STAR WARS did?*

MIKE: If you look historically, we can all sit back and soon see "Captain Nice — the Movie" and the $90 million "Mr. Terrific" minseries.

JACK: *Truthfully, did you expect the magnitude of box-office from the BATMAN movie?*

MIKE: I always expected that it would be a very successful movie. I always believed that, even when people said I was crazy and that it was a horrible idea. In the ten years it took us to get it realized, there wasn't a second I doubted. What I couldn't anticipate was that it would go beyond being "very successful" and become an *event* that would become ingrained into the worldwide culture.

I became keenly aware of this by hearing a story told to me by a friend who is a reporter for PARADE Magazine. At the end of July, he was coming back from the jungles of Central America. They had traveled through the night to the middle of nowhere to a small village. They went to sleep that night in a very tiny village inn. When he got up the next morning and walked out into a clearing, the first thing he sees are two native kids wearing BATMAN T-shirts. He said no matter where he was in the world, there was no escaping BATMAN.

For myself, I remember the night the Berlin wall came down. I was up at 2 a.m. watching live coverage when I looked up and saw a guy coming through the wall from the east wearing a BATMAN hat.

JACK: *Was all the advance interest in the media — virtually across the board — generated as part of a strategy on their part . . . or a spontaneous lucky break?*

MIKE: Warner Brothers did the best marketing job in the history of motion pictures. It was all carefully coordinated through their various departments. There was very little "luck" involved. You have to remember that the BATMAN property has been pre-sold for 50 years worldwide. It doesn't matter if you were 15 in 1939 or 5 in 1989, you have grown up with BATMAN. You might have related to TV or comic books or cartoons. People *knew* BATMAN. After the marketing, it was like spontaneous combustion. During that first week of the film's release, it became "the thing to do" on the college campus to camp out and party on theater lines. It became an amazing phenomenon.

JACK: *How did you answer charges that, by making the Joker Batman's creator, and resolving the conflict, motivation for the Dark Knight's life-long vendetta against crime has been removed?*

MIKE: In the comics, Batman finally caught up with Joe Chill and Lew Moxon, the man who killed and the man who ordered the killing of his parents. Did he give up being the Batman then? No, of course not. He'd sampled crime on a mass basis. If you remember the Batman story with no dialogue, "Night of the Stalker," you'll remember how he feels; that no matter who crime happens to, to him or another kid, Batman has taken up the call to arms of the people. I think we're right in tune with the comics, historically.

JACK: *Did you agree with the change to Sam Hamm's script by Warren Skaaren to make the Joker the murderer of Bruce Wayne's parents?*

MIKE: Yes. In fact, and you'll have to check this with **Bob Kane,** I think he said that if the Joker had been created earlier, he would have been the Waynes' killer in the comics, as well.

JACK: *Was the other man in the alley on the night of the Waynes' murder supposed to be Joe Chill?*

MIKE: Yes. In fact you'll recall that it was Chill who grabbed Bruce's mother's necklace

JACK: *Who will decide upon what happens in BATMAN II? How will the plot or storyline be generated and finalized — what is the process?*

MIKE: Warner Brothers has the final say. Whoever puts up the money always has the final say. The process will begin with the director and writer having conversations, and those of us who have specific ideas and thoughts will share them as well

JACK: *Does anyone, at this point —even if not willing to speak for the record — actually know what will take place in the sequel?*

MIKE: No.

JACK: *Do you have a director? Screenwriter? Anyone doing treatments?*

MIKE: You can expect an announcement from Warner Brothers soon.

JACK: *Is it true Frank Miller may wrtie the screenplay — based on hts DARK KNIGHT RETURNS?*

MIKE: We have a policy never to comment on rumors. You'll discover that 90% or more of all rumors in this business are never true. It's always best to stick by and wait for the official announcements. If you believed the first rumors about BATMAN, then **Burt Reynolds** would have the lead and **David Niven** would be Alfred.

JACK: *Who will play Robin — and will BATMAN II be the story of Robin's origin and how he got together with BATMAN?*

MIKE: Since there is no script at this point, there has been no casting, so it's really impossible to say.

JACK: *If Robin is introduced in the sequel — how can you hope to preserve the "night feeling" in the BATMAN films?*

MIKE: Because we deal with very bright and perceptive writers and directors, all fully aware of the legend of Batman, you can count on them to make it work.

JACK: *By letting Vicki Vale in on Bruce Wayne's secret identity, haven't you compromised the entire 50-year BATMAN legend?*

MIKE: No.

JACK: *Has Kim Basinger or Michael Keaton signed for a sequel?*

MIKE: Nobody is in place yet. It's too early to comment.

JACK: *If you can't say yea or nay to Keaton yet — can you tell us whether you had alternate plans in case the movie was a hit and you needed another actor for the sequel?*

MIKE: From the time Tim first brought up **Keaton's** name, no one else was considered for the role.

JACK: *How do you follow up on what may prove to be the most successful motion picture made to date?*

MIKE: BATMAN has 50 years of stories and history plus the best rogues' gallery in the history of comic books. That ensures the best possible material for a parade of sequels. Just look at the first-string villains that have yet to be touched: Catwoman, Penguin, Two-Face, the Riddler, Man-Bat, Ras Al Ghul. And then there's Robin. There alone, you have enough material for a half-dozen films. BATMAN is one of the richest properties available today story-wise.

JACK: *Have Cher or Robin Williams or Danny DeVito been approached to play villains?*

MIKE: No.

JACK: *Is there a tentative release date set for the sequel?*

MIKE: Everyone is hoping for 1991.

JACK: *Any chance we'll ever see a Batman/Superman movie crossover somewhere down the line?*

MIKE: This is primarily a legal question rather than a creative one. Who knows, if the comic-book world could see a Superman/Spider-Man crossover, then anything is possible.

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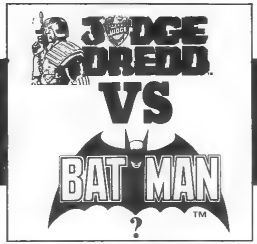

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AN OPEN LETTER TO THE COMIC-BOOK INDUSTRY FROM MINDGAME

Many of you may have heard that Mindgame has recently solicited for a product for which we did not have licensing. We would like to clear up any misconceptions and present the story as it happened.

In June of this year our new products department developed a concept to merchandise DC's ARKHAM ASYLUM hardcover book. The idea was to have a hospital "scrub" style shirt with "Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane" printed over the pocket. The clincher was that each shirt was also going to have an individual "inmate number" so that all the shirts were different. All of our market research (which includes direct contact with retailers and distributors nationwide) indicated that we could easily sell 25,000 of these shirts in the direct market. In light of the recent news that the ARKHAM ASYLUM hardcover was to be the highest grossing "comic book" in history, 25,000 may have even been a low estimate.

The next step was to contact DC in order to acquire the licensing. Upon doing this we discovered that DC does not handle the merchandising rights to their own characters. They farm this responsibility out to the Licensing Corporation of America (LCA). This is a Warner Brothers company who also handles all of the Warner Brothers movies, cartoons and everything else. We needed to speak to someone named **Michelle Greenberg.** We called LCA and were told "We only handle Batman and are not licensing any more Batman merchandise."

So we called DC again and told them just that. DC informed us that LCA handles all of the DC characters. We called LCA again who said "Oh, we made a mistake. We handle Batman and Superman." They had never heard of anything called "ARKHAM ASYLUM" and were sure it wasn't their responsibility. At this point we were getting the feeling that no one at LCA actually reads DC comics.

Back to DC. This time DC firmly told us that LCA handles absolutely everything that DC puts out. Upon calling LCA yet another time we had a conversation that went almost exactly like this:

MINDGAME: *We would like to license the phrase "Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane" for a T-shirt.*
LCA: We already told you we only handle Superman and Batman.
MINDGAME: *DC informs us that you handle every DC character.*
LCA: What do you mean?
MINDGAME: *You know, all of the other DC heroes and villains.*
LCA: You mean, like The Hulk?

By now we are firmly convinced that nobody in the LCA offices has had a DC comic in their hands in years, maybe never. One would think that reading DC comics would be a prerequisite for someone whose responsibility is to license permission to use DC characters. Apparently, Warner Brothers doesn't feel this is necessary. Regardless, we had managed to finally get LCA to send us a licensing application which we subsequently filled out and sent back. The next three to four weeks were a frustrating series of "She'll get back to you" or "She's in a meeting" replies from **Ms. Greenberg's** secretary.

During this period one of our people managed to speak to **Bruce Bristow** (DC's marketing director) at the San Diego Comicon. Bruce expressed interest in the product, thought it would be a lucrative project, and gave us the name of the woman at DC who apparently has the last word on all merchandise after LCA has processed it. Her name was **Cheryl Rubin** and after a few tries, we managed to speak to her directly. We were very relieved to discover that **Ms. Rubin,** quite frankly, knows what the heck she's talking about concerning DC comics. She also seemed interested in the shirt and asked us to send her a complete proposal with as much information as we could. We did. She seemed rather enthusiastic about the shirt, and after a few conversations with her, we felt that we had a green light to get the ball rolling at our end.

As anyone in the comic merchandising business knows, one of the biggest problems we face is the four-month solicitation process. In order to time our merchandise to hit the stores around the same time as the affiliated book does (especially when dealing with one-shot books), we frequently must solicit merchandise for which there is not a written contract. This contract is *always* completed before a single shirt or other piece of merchandise is sold or shipped. This is what we did with the Arkham shirt. Maybe we don't have a leg to stand on legally, but it's simply the way it has to be done. Added to this is the fact that we sent **Ms. Rubin** a rough copy of the solicitation flyer and had numerous conversations with her after she received it. She never mentioned it once.

Apparently after all of this, LCA lumped us into the category of "Batman Merchandise" and refused the license because they're not doing any more Batman licensing. Our shirt did not have any Batman images, logos or indicia anywhere on it. They said that because ARKHAM ASYLUM is a Batman story, we were trying to license Batman. This is akin to someone trying to license a Flash shirt and being refused because the Flash and Batman have appeared in some of the same books over the years.

We were subsequently told by LCA's legal department that we had to retract all advertising and publish another flyer saying that we don't have the right to make the shirt. We've done so, and would have done so simply as a courtesy to our distributors and retailers.

This is not a situation Mindgame has been in before and hopes never to be in again. We hope our reputation has not been soiled and appreciate your understanding. This is obviously not the first time DC has flexed its corporate muscle and it won't be the last. We are hurt and angry at the fact that DC feels that they no longer have to play by the same rules that the rest of the comic industry adheres to. For years people have wondered why there is as much, if not more, substandard DC merchandise as there is quality merchandise. The answer is simple: LCA and Warner Brothers don't care about comics and have no idea what they're all about. We are not interested in making DC look like villains since we understand that their hands are often tied by the "marketing professionals and executives" at Warner. We *are* interested in making clear that we feel we had not acted unethically and had no plans to steal anybody's licensed properties for our own ends.

If you feel that Mindgame has been treated unfairly and would have purchased this item for yourself or your store, please send a letter saying exactly that to: DC Comics, 666 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10103, Attn: **Cheryl Rubin.** Once again, we apologize to the industry and hope this situation does not negatively affect your opinion of Mindgame.

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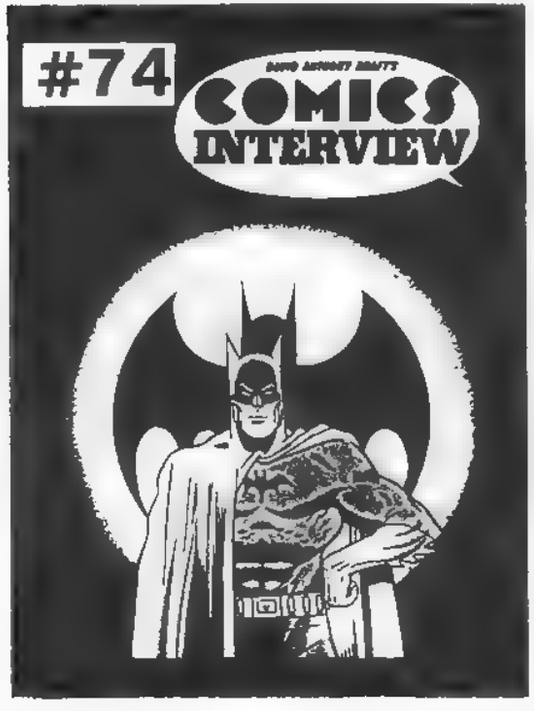

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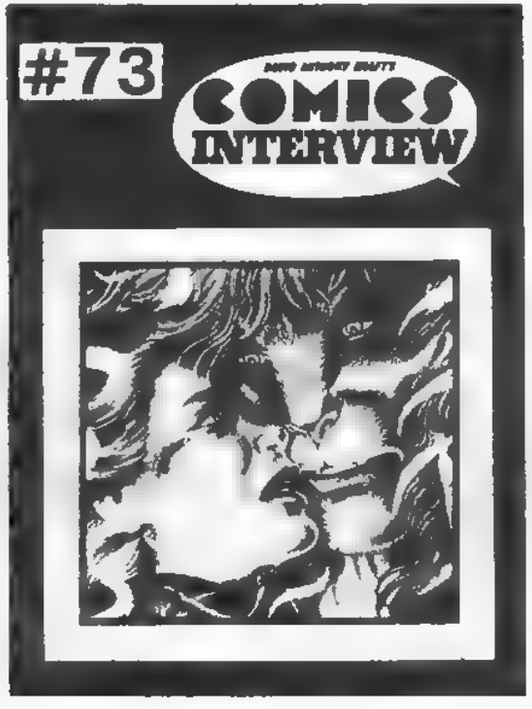

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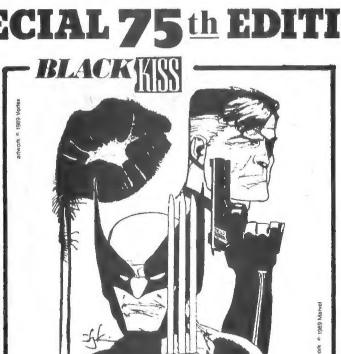

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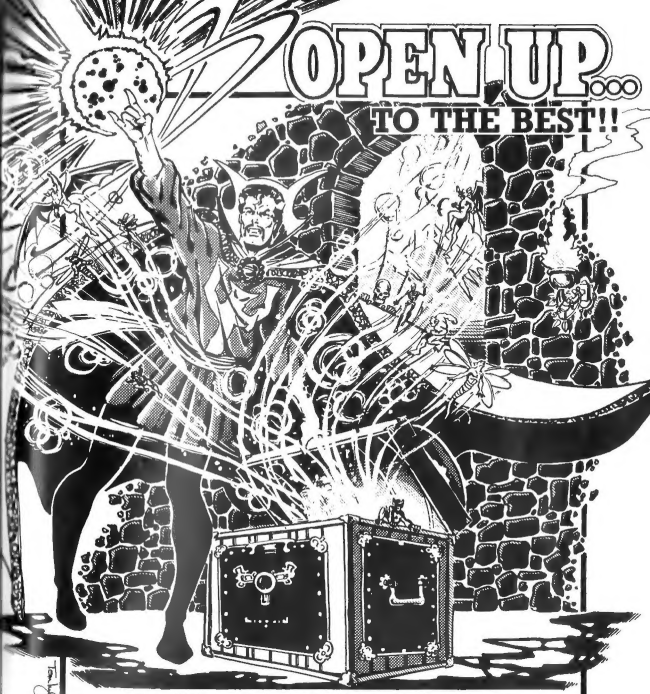

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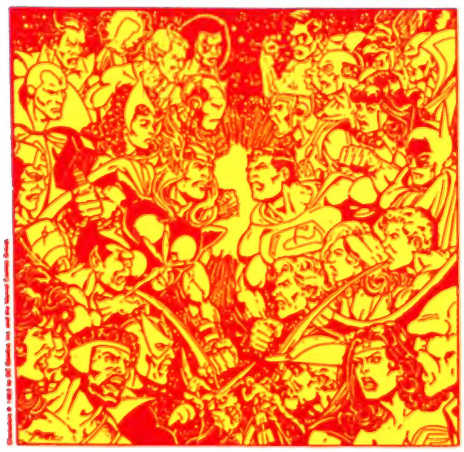

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